THE TEACHING MINISTRY OF ELDERS
IN THE
CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)

A Professional Project

Presented to

the Faculty of the

School of Theology at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

by

Ruth Fletcher

May 1994

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Ruth Fletcher,

has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Theology at Claremont in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

The Teaching Ministry of Elders
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Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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Ruth Fletcher

Elected Elders in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) serve alongside the pastoral leadership in a three-fold ministry of teaching, caring for those in need, and overseeing the spiritual life of a congregation. Since Elders are usually chosen on the basis of spiritual maturity, and since tradition and scripture prescribe teaching as one of their primary functions, the Eldership could prove to be a significant factor in enhancing the quality of education in the church; yet, many Elders do not see themselves as teachers and little direction has been provided regarding specific ways they can and should teach. This project presents a conceptual framework for understanding the teaching ministry of the church and offers practical suggestions about how the Eldership can more fully participate in that ministry.

Chapter One identifies the purpose of teaching in the church as spiritual formation and suggests that such formation takes place by encountering truth in tradition, by developing trust in relationship, and by practicing spiritual disciplines within a community of people who are seeking to set aside self-securing behaviors in order to live more fully in God.

Chapter Two examines how Christian identity was formed through experience of the Table Fellowship in the early church. Theirs was a blended tradition through which they came to understand

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themselves as a community of equal souls, in touch with power, singularly loyal to God, living in God's Realm. As such, they believed they were to exhibit unity and servanthood as a witness to the world. The chapter concludes by identifying how the words and actions of the Elders at the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper continue to shape the self-understanding of the church today.

Chapter Three demonstrates how Elders can teach in and through one-on-one moments of caring for those in transition, taking advantage of learning points which appear at various stages in the cycle of change. It offers examples of transitions using the stories of the Emmaus Road, the Exodus Epic, and the Death, Burial, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Chapter Four highlights the role of the Elder as teacher or supporter of education in the classroom setting where the Christian Story is placed in dialogue with current life experience. It advocates involvement, mutuality, and accountability as the characteristics of an effective educational ministry.

The Appendix contains a four-session design for using this resource in a weekend retreat setting or as a series of four two-hour group meetings with Elders in one congregation, or in clusters within the Regional Church.

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PREFACE

Who are we? For the last hundred years or so, the Eldership of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been asking that question. The identity crisis, brought on in part by a shift of power from the Eldership to the professional ministry in the nineteenth century and a shift of decision-making responsibility to the administrative boards of congregations in the twentieth century, has caused Elders to focus attention on clarifying and reclaiming their unique leadership role in the church. During the last decade in particular, the Eldership has sought to recover the best of the past and anticipate the needs of the future in order to strengthen its own effectiveness as a body of spiritual leaders in the church today.

In that search, groups of Elders meeting together in study have found two resources to be particularly useful. The first is a curriculum written by Peter Morgan called Disciples Eldership: A Quest for Identity and Ministry; the second is a handbook produced in 1990 by the Disciples Seminary Foundation in Claremont, California entitled The Ministry of Elders: A Handbook for Elders in Congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).[1] Extensive

[1] Peter Morgan, Disciples Eldership: A Quest for Identity and Ministry (St Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1983); and Edwin C. Linberg and Rod Parrott, The Ministry of Elders: A Handbook for Elders in Congregation of the Christian Church

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sections in each resource describing the function of Elders in the church of the first century and in the Campbell-Stone movement have helped root today's Eldership in time-honored historical tradition. Other chapters have aided Elders' self-understanding by naming two specific congregational responsibilities as the core of their ministry: teaching and caring for those in need.

A third function that once would have headed the list of Eldership responsibilities now may weave in and through the other two: the task of oversight; the ruling or governing of the congregation. In the nineteenth century, many voices in the church rose to oppose the abuse of this function by ruling Elders who had become autocratic dictators of policy and practice.[2] Today, overseeing the spiritual and administrative life of the church is taking on another tone as Elders learn to minister in partnership alongside the pastoral leadership, the diaconate, and the other administrative officers of the congregation, prayerfully considering their role as servants. In the words of Peter Morgan,

> The emerging Disciples eldership is now finding appropriate ways to oversee by

(Disciples of Christ) (Claremont, Calif.: Disciples Seminary Foundation, 1990.)

[2] In the early years of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), some Elders believed their rule over the congregation included ruling over those who preached as well, sometimes even rising to their feet during a sermon to object to some point of doctrine. See Morgan, 27.

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> sharing spiritual insight, articulating its vision of the congregation's mission, by giving evaluation and support to congregational programs in a pastoral style, and by linking the people of the congregation to the source of their vision and strength in leadership at the Lord's Table.[3]

Of course, recognizing there is a variety of gifts among the Eldership, not all Elders will participate equally in all the tasks which the group is called to perform in any given congregation. Limitations regarding skill, time, and interest make it impossible for any individual to do the whole job alone. Yet, by working together, a team of Elders can provide leadership needed in the life of a congregation, with some concentrating their energies primarily on teaching and some on giving care. It is the purpose of this book to focus on the first task on the list of Eldership roles: the teaching ministry.

Teaching has long been seen as a cornerstone of spiritual leadership of a congregation; that is, in tending the flock (Acts 20:28, 1 Pet. 5:3). The Hebrew Scriptures first tell the story of Moses appointing wise, understanding, experienced, spirit-bearing Elders whose task it was to discern what was true and just in disputes arising within the tribes.[4] Originally chosen from the priestly

[3] Morgan, 65.

[4] See Exod. 18:13-27; Deut. 1:9-18; Num. 11:10-25. All quotations in this publication are cited from the New Revised Standard Version.

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families or the scribes, this group evolved into a council made up of Elders who were called out of the larger community, eventually forming the *sanhedrin*, the group named in the Gospels as responsible for teaching and interpreting the law.[5]

The New Testament also bears witness to the role of the Teaching Elder in the Early Christian Church. Steeped in the Jewish heritage of Eldership, Paul lists teaching as one of the primary tasks for the building up of the body of Christ (Rom. 12:7b, 1 Cor. 12:28). Later, in discussing qualifications for church leadership, one of the Pastoral Epistles suggests an Elder should be an "apt teacher" (1 Tim. 3:2) and calls upon the congregation to honor those who "labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17).[6]

In the first three centuries, as church organization evolved into more hierarchical forms, the term Elder (Presbyter) was used interchangeably with various other offices such as Bishop and Priest; yet concern for the teaching ministry continued throughout the centuries.[7]

[5] Guenther Bornkamm, "Presbys.," in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. 6, ed. Gerhard Friedrick (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 651-83. See also: Mark 14:43,53; 15:1; Matt. 16:21; 27:41.

[6] For a comprehensive overview of teaching in Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament, see Clark M. Williamson and Ronald J. Allen, The Teaching Minister (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 26-46.

[7] For a comprehensive overview of the history of teaching in the church, see Williamson and Allen, 47-64.

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Elders preserved the tradition that had been passed down from the Apostles through their public teaching in the midst of debates about the nature of Christ.[8] They taught through letters, sermons, tracts, lectures, and debates.[9] Some played a role in schools administered by the church in the Middle Ages and when the schools were disrupted due to military invasion, the duty of teaching young "clerks" fell to the Eldership.[10]

In the Campbell-Stone movement, Elders were charged with the edification of the congregation since they lived and worked in the local community instead of moving around from place to place as did the itinerant evangelists. From the words of Alexander Campbell, it is clear how seriously their teaching role was regarded.

> It is the duty of the Elders to attend to all the spiritual interests of the congregation of which they have been constituted the overseers. . . . They watch for souls as those that must give an account. Hence every Elder is an authorized teacher.[11]

[8] Irenaeus (c.130-c.200), Bishop of Lyons in France appealed to the "tradition which has come down from the apostles and is guarded by the successions of elders in the churches." See Irenaeus, "Against the Heresies," in Documents in Early Christian Thought, eds. Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer, trans. E. R. Hardy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 4.2.

[9] Williamson and Allen, 50, 55.

[10] Williamson and Allen, 55.

[11] Alexander Campbell, "The Eldership," Millennial Harbinger, Abridged, 1838, 287.

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Mostly, the teaching ministry of the Eldership was carried out in the weekly worship service where Elders led singing, read Scripture, offered commentary and moral exhortation, and presided at the observance of the Lord's Supper.[12] They were equipped to teach mostly through their own faithful reading of the Bible. However, in the first half of the nineteenth century, various events also were held for the purpose of educating the Eldership beyond their own personal study.[13]

Of course, expectations regarding teaching style were much different back then; congregations who prized sound doctrine more than rhetoric did not expect something new each Sunday. Consequently, teaching could be repetitive with certain standard sermons serving as an Elder's testament in faith.[14] Typical was the teaching of Elder John Smith, appointed to the office by the church at Georgetown, Kentucky after his retirement from itineracy in 1851.

> Whether warning young disciples against the fascinations of the dance and other popular amusements, or discouraging all departures from the Ancient Order in the public assemblies, he was the prudent but resolute opposer of everything that he believed to be unfavorable to a pure,

[12] Alexander Campbell, "Church Order and Organization," Millennial Harbinger, Abridged, 1835, 125.

[13] Ronald E. Osborn, "The Eldership among Disciples of Christ," Midstream 6, no. 2 (Winter 1967): 91.

[14] Osborn, 87.

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> spiritual life and worship among the children of God.[15]

Yet, times have changed. Today the Eldership formally teaches through worship leadership, in situations when Elders offer care to members of the congregation, and in the classroom or small group setting. Informally, Elders teach by example. Like it or not, many in the congregation look to them as spiritual mentors. For young people in the church, they serve as guarantors; that is, by their very presence, Elders proclaim, "I made it through hard times with the resources provided by my faith, and you can too."

The Eldership teaches through avenues such as meditations and prayers offered at the Lord's Table. Elders teach when they are with members of the congregation who are seeking advice. They teach in new membership orientations and through their participation on boards and committees. Often, they are called upon to interpret wider church ministries, to offer stewardship meditations. Many are involved in the oversight of Christian education classes; some teach in those classes themselves. During Advent and Lent, Elders often serve as leaders of small group studies.

Such an extensive menu of responsibilities can overwhelm the Eldership who takes seriously the call to teach in the congregation. As the second in the series of

[15] John Augustus Williams, Life of Elder John Smith (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1870), 555 as quoted in Osborn, 87.

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manuals on the Eldership published by the Disciples Seminary Foundation, this project is designed to alleviate some fears that Elders may have by identifying ways the Eldership already teaches through its involvement in congregational life, deepening understanding of what the teaching task requires, and equipping this group with the skills necessary to more intentionally carry out that ministry with care and competence.

Chapter 1 centers on the purpose of the educational ministry, exploring ways participation in the church community plays a formative role in the maturing of faith and growth in discipleship and suggesting ways the Eldership can enhance the quality of education in the church as a group elected to leadership on the basis of spiritual maturity.

Chapter 2 identifies how Christian identity was formed though the experience of the Table Fellowship in the early church and explores how the words and actions of the Elder at the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper continue to shape the self-understanding of the church today.

Chapter 3 demonstrates how Elders can teach in and through one-on-one moments of caring for those in transition, taking advantage of learning points which appear at various stages in the cycle of change.

Chapter 4 highlights the role of the Elder as teacher or supporter of education in the classroom setting where the

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Christian Story is placed in dialogue with current life experience.

The Appendix contains a four-session design for using this resource in a weekend retreat setting or in a series of four two-hour group meetings with Elders in one congregation, or in clusters within the Regional Church.

It is my hope that this book and the interaction that comes as a result of its consideration will strengthen the church, empowering Elders to claim their role as teachers, and better preparing them for that task.

Ruth Fletcher

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CHAPTER 1

The Teaching Ministry of the Church

If anybody asks you who I am,
Who I am, who I am,
If anybody asks you who I am,
Tell him I'm a child of God.
Traditional Spiritual

A few years ago, I was assisting a group of high school youth who were planning a conference for young people in the Regional Church. We had arrived at the question of theme so I asked, "What would you like to learn at this event?"

There was an uneasy silence. Glances were exchanged. Finally one young man spoke up, obviously on behalf of the group. "Well, we're kind of embarrassed to say this, but we'd really like to know what it means to be Christian. You know, basically. What makes it unique."

"Yes," a young woman joined in. "None of us can really tell much difference between people inside and people outside our congregations."

The young man spoke again. "In my school, for instance, there are plenty of students who do what's right, who spend lots of time helping others, but they don't go to church. Some of them aren't even religious. As far as I can see, the only distinction between my life and theirs is that I have to get up early on Sunday morning and they don't!"

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These young people were not nominal participants of their congregations; on the contrary, they had grown up in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as leaders among their peers. Yet, all they had been able to glean from their sixteen-year association with the church was that being Christian amounted to being virtuous and helpful. Why had they received such an anemic message as to the nature of discipleship?

To find the answer, we must look back to the years before the 1960s. Then, to be socialized into the mainstream culture in the United States or Canada was to be socialized into Christianity. "There was no boundary between people on the local scene, defining one group as 'church' and another as 'world.'"[1] Even though we in the United States professed a separation between church and state, in reality, the sacred and the secular strengthened each other. To be born into a family who went to church was to become a part of both the community and the congregation.

> Baptism recognized what was already a reality. The life of the entire community was understood as the medium for nurturing the individual in the faith; community pageants and festivals told the story of the faith.[2]

Government, school, and family all worked in harmony so that it was possible for people to "grow up Christian and never

[1] Loren Mead, The Once and Future Church (New York: Alban Institute, 1991), 14.

[2] Mead, 16.

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know themselves as being otherwise."[3] William Willimon describes his own experience of living in the Southern part of the United States.

> My parents did not worry about whether or not I would grow up Christian. After all, ours was the only game in town. Everybody we knew was Christian. There was a traffic jam in Greenville, South Carolina at 9:45 on Sunday mornings as everyone scurried into Sunday school. One became Christian . . . by osmosis, by being lucky enough to have been born in Greenville. We went to Sunday School, but not to become more mature in our faith We came to uncover our feelings about God, to learn to be nice to other people, to be encouraged to be even nicer than we already were.[4]

In the 1940s and 50s, churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike agreed as to what constituted "character," even if some would admit they did not live up to the standard all the time. Martin Buber suggests those qualities were contained in figures such as "the gentleman," "the citizen," and "the Christian," images that were so interchangeable that there was very little distinction among them.[5] Being a good Christian meant being a good, law-abiding citizen who was polite and obedient to one's superiors and supported the

[3] This phrase was made famous in Horace Bushnell, Christian Nurture (1861; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 10.

[4] William H. Willimon, "Pastors as Teachers," in Rethinking Christian Education, ed. David S. Schuller (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993), 52.

[5] Martin Buber, Between Man and Man (London: Kegan Paul, 1947),90 as cited in Maria Harris, Teaching and Religious Imagination (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 75.

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church and the government with one's prayers, and if necessary, one's life.[6] The three models formed a consensus about the values that should be instilled in the young; teachers had a criterion they could hold up in front of their students like a topographical map and say, "Here's where you are going."[7]

This myth of a mono-culture was perpetuated in literature, in advertisements, and eventually on television. Of course, in hindsight, we can see that the apparent consensus was just that--a myth. The illusion of a mono-culture was achieved at the expense of many minorities within the culture; it was maintained by ignoring much of the oppression and segregation that kept some groups of people subject to those who held economic and social power.

In recent years, the apparently uniform norms regarding what it means to be Christian have disappeared altogether. Boundaries in the secular world that once kept us compartmentalized are also breaking down. New communication technologies are shrinking our planet. A global economy, expanding business networks, and growing ecological awareness are presenting us with the reality of our interdependence. Increasing numbers of Christians in Africa, Latin America, and Asia are showing North Americans

[6] Mead, 17.

[7] Buber in Harris, 75.

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that even Christianity takes on many different expressions when it rubs up against other cultures.

Choices are expanding. Where stores used to carry several trusted brands, now supermarkets and restaurants provide us with an extensive variety of food from around the world and shopping malls offer just about any kind of merchandise we can imagine. Where several major networks once controlled the air, now we can click through channel after channel on our televisions. Microwaves, computers, and video machines have all made for increased lifestyle choices.

Advances in medical technology have also introduced new ethical decisions regarding life and death issues. How much should human beings interfere with nature? *Should* scientists do everything they *can* do? Who should receive care and who should not? What measures should be taken to preserve life? Who should make such choices? As Christians today, we find ourselves being confronted with options which never faced our ancestors.

Plurality is a fact of life. We can walk down the street of most any city and see a multiplicity of skin tones and clothing styles; we can hear an assortment of languages. With our new awareness of the variety of other religions which are being practiced alongside Christianity, schools have moved to become more secularized. Families of many configurations no longer agree about what values should be

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taught. In the words of Michael Kinnamon, "We now live, not only with the knowledge that there are people who see the world differently, but with neighbors who, in fact, do see it differently."[8]

We can no longer assume that being Christian can be equated with those normative civil values of by-gone years; nor can we assume that the church can rely on the family, the school, and the society at large to help with the task of transmitting knowledge about the Bible, about the Christian tradition, and about the practices of the Christian faith. The change that has taken place within the last three decades makes it impossible to return to the "churched culture" of bygone eras.[9] Those days have simply vanished. In the vacuum that has been created by their disappearance, we find a very real confusion present in the church as it struggles to live in and relate to an increasingly diverse and complex world. In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we hear voices simultaneously crying in hunger for spiritual guidance and in disinterest about attending programs of Christian Education sponsored by the congregation.

[8] Michael Kinnamon, words spoken during a workshop entitled "Expressing A Vital Faith for the 21st Century" at the 1993 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), St. Louis, 17 July, 1993.

[9] The term "churched culture" comes from Kennon Callahan, Effective Church Leadership (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 3.

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A recent study of ecumenically-oriented denominations in the United States concluded, "Effective Christian Education is the most powerful single influence congregations have on maturity of faith";[10] yet, church leadership complains of widespread ignorance among the laity regarding Scripture and tradition, Christian Education Committees report difficulty recruiting quality teachers, and program participants admit they find many curriculum offerings boring and irrelevant to contemporary living. Only about one-third of the adults in Disciple congregations are active in any kind of church-based education program.[11]

With the lack of Biblical knowledge, the lack of commitment to learning about the faith, and the lack of quality Christian education classes, over time, we have lost our sense of who we are as Disciples of Christ. Even more detrimental, some of our congregations have lost their sense of who God is, entertaining a cynicism that claims the impossibility of knowing God at all. Although Craig Dykstra may overstate his point, I believe his analysis is correct: in many places

> a kind of practical atheism infects church life, despite the fact that religious services continue to be conducted. We continue our rituals and manage the institutions, but we are not

[10] Peter L. Benson and Carolyn Eklin, Effective Christian Education: A Report for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (Minneapolis: SEARCH Institute, 1990), 3.

[11] Benson and Eklin, Report for the Christian Church, 37.

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> really sure that all the things we do in church and as church count for much. Does the practice of prayer really have any point if we have no real confidence that our praying is anything more than a psychological defense mechanism or a corporate expression of opinion?[12]

The young people on the planning team were merely speaking the truth that many adults recognize but do not articulate: in the midst of a culture that is sometimes hostile, sometimes supportive, and often indifferent, it is frequently hard to tell what a Christian is supposed to be and do by looking at the current witness of the church.[13] Yet, with the demise of the mono-cultural myth, we have a unique opportunity to think together about what is essential to our Christian self-understanding and to our teaching ministry.

Futurists tell us we can expect a worldwide multi-denominational religious revival as we begin the third millennium. In fact, they suggest a spiritual awakening is already among us.[14] No matter what we usually think about the accuracy of such predictions, even casual conversation with co-workers, friends, and family members, or a glance at the news will tell us that there is a tremendous amount of

[12] Craig Dykstra, "Education in Christian Practice," paper presented at the Earl Lectures, Berkeley, Calif., 22-24 January 1991, Lecture 1, 15.

[13] Mead, 26-27.

[14] John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, Megatrends 2000 (New York: Avon Books, 1990), 290.

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spiritual seeking going on today. Both Christians and non-Christians are longing for an experience of the Holy.

In these changing times, it will not do to put band-aids on our confusion simply by creating new programs or buying new curriculum or looking to the latest gee-whiz technology to capture interest; what is needed is a deep, honest examination of ourselves in light of the Gospel's call to faithfulness. As spiritual leaders, the Eldership is in a position to help the church reclaim a vision of who it is called to be and to transcend the limited view of former eras, acknowledging what is at stake is nothing less than how we ultimately interpret our lives, how we understand God, how we relate to others, and how we engage the world in ways that faithfully reflect our commitment to following Jesus Christ.

Formation by Truth in Tradition

Believers have always looked to the older generation to preserve and transmit what is integral to community identity, passing on the body of knowledge that makes up the tradition both through instruction and through practice. The Hebrew Scriptures report many instances of the new generation asking their spiritual leaders, "What does this mean?"[15] Observing the festival meals, listening to the reading of the law, watching the way ordinary objects are

[15] See Exod. 12:26, 13:14; Deut. 6:20-21; and Josh. 4:6, 21.

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treated with reverence, the young want to understand what is behind what they see; they want to know to what and to whom they belong.

In those Biblical accounts, we notice it is the distinctiveness of the community's practice, story, and sacrament that evokes such curiosity. By participating in community rituals which are very different than anything else they do in the course of their ordinary lives, by observing how those rites provide strength and meaning for established members, novices are motivated to ask the question which provides an opportunity for teaching. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann observes how the process worked during ancient festivals.

> On these occasions, Israel capitalized on the yearning. . . to penetrate these marvelous mysteries of the adult world which seem to be so precious and satisfying. Authority was evident in the capacity to keep a secret and then, at the right time to share a secret.[16]

The secret, the truth which provides the community with its identity and direction, is frequently revealed through story. "Story" in this sense, has to do with the whole tradition of a people which "binds them together as a community, enables them to make meaning out of chaos, and invites commitment to an ultimate center of value."[17]

[16] Walter Brueggemann, The Creative Word (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 16.

[17] Thomas Groome, Sharing Faith (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1991), 114.

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To a large degree, the story of the Hebrews is synonymous with the Exodus event.

> ". . . [the Lord] passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses." (Exod. 12:27)
>
> "By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery." (Exod. 13:14b)
>
> "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. . . . Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case." (Deut. 6:21b-22,24)
>
> "Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground." For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God forever. (Josh. 4:22b-24)

This tradition focuses on the transcendent God who breaks in prior to any action on the part of humanity, who acts with power, who takes the initiative, revealing the divine nature and presence in and through concrete, historical events. It attests to the fact that humanity never comes to know truth by its actions alone. In the words of religious educator

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Thomas Groome, ". . . truth comes to meet us, and we as much allow ourselves to be found as we find it."[18]

Through story, the Hebrews learn about the corporate identity of the community: We were slaves, but by God's actions we were freed. The tradition identifies who they are as a people, to whom they are related, where they came from, and where they are going. Again, Brueggemann observes:

> These stable, known answers announce what is normative for both generations . . . [they] do not assume that the [learner] must locate a normative answer in his or her own experience. . . . It is not asked if the [hearers] will find the answer convincing or binding, or if they will find it too heavy or complicated or parochial or embarrassing. And it is not asked if the [one] who speaks it has misgivings or reservations. The elemental educational moment is uncomplicated, unencumbered and unembarrassed. . . . It is [delivered] with confidence, nerve, passion, delight.[19]

Those in the older generation know the stories and they offer them as explanations. The explanations, in turn, open the community to the Ultimate Reality around which everything else should revolve. They establish a truth which is

> *cognitive* in that it "rings true" to and is meaningful (i.e., makes sense) for people's own lives, *relational* in that it prompts people to relate to life as

[18] Groome, Sharing Faith, 127.

[19] Walter Brueggemann, 16-18.

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> trustworthy and trustworthily, and *moral* in that people realize it as an ethic of and *for* life.[20]

Above all, the truth that the stories declare is reliable and can stand up to life's testing.

In this day and age when the language, assumptions, and convictions of our radically secular culture simply no longer seem rich enough to sustain a meaningful life, many are rediscovering the truth of the Bible.[21] It is through the Scripture that the church's story is transmitted from generation to generation. Even in these changing times, it is the normative book of the church's tradition, giving us a common language with which to talk about our own experiences of God. It roots us in the past, offers hope in the present, and assures us of God's continuing presence in the future.

Elders concerned with passing on the essentials of the tradition must be able to find their way around the book, learning methods for reading and understanding the Bible's contents, such as comparing variant readings, noting literary type, exploring the intended meaning in light of the original context, and plumbing the significance of symbols. Figure 1 offers a list of specific principles that historically have been used by Disciples of Christ in

[20] Groome, Sharing Faith, 128.

[21] Dykstra, "Education in Christian Practice," Lecture 1, 7-8.

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interpreting Scripture. Such principles, which can be applied to all literature, should prove useful to Elders who themselves are seeking to become literate in the Bible's stories and teachings and who are charged with the task of helping others to interpret what is read.

Secondarily, the truth of our story is passed on through human experience and reflections concerning God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and human nature that come to us outside the Bible. The stories of heroes and heroines, scoundrels and villains who have been part of our heritage can provide powerful insights into the ways human beings experience God, others, and the world.

As the Eldership learns about the continuing revelation of God's Spirit beyond the Bible, the fields of church history, ethics, and theology come into play. Studying the tradition of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in particular, Elders discover an ongoing emphasis on certain themes--the centrality of Christ, the importance of Scripture, the unity of the church, the liberty of opinion, the ministry of the laity, and mutuality of shared power--old shoes capable of traveling new paths.

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Figure 1

Alexander Campbell's Principles of Biblical Interpretation

1. One must first consider the historical circumstances of the book such as order, title, author, date, place, and occasion.

2. With reference to such things as promises, commands, exhortations, etc., one must consider who speaks, the persons addressed, and the [time in which] the incident took place.

3. The same philological principles are to be applied to whatever is written in the Bible as are applied to the language of other books.

4. Common usage as determined by the proper testimony such as dictionary and context must always decide the meaning of a word.

5. In figurative language, one must always determine the point of resemblance, and judge, from the nature of the figure, the standpoint from which the resemblance is to be viewed.

6. In interpreting symbols, types, allegories, etc., there is one supreme rule: Ascertain the point to be illustrated; for comparison is never to be extended beyond that point.

7. For the salutary and sanctifying intelligence of the Oracles of God. . . we must come within the understanding distance. . . . God Himself is the centre of that circle, and humility is its circumference.[22]

[22] Alexander Campbell, A Connected View of the Principles and Rules by Which the Living Oracles May Be Intelligibly and Certainly Interpreted (Bethany, Va.: M'Vay and Ewing, 1835), 2:6.

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Thirdly, we relay the truth of our story through traditional patterns of spiritual disciplines, those habits of study, confession, meditation, stewardship, and service through which God can be revealed and the Spirit can be discerned. Such habits can anchor a community, giving it a sense of stability in times of change.

Although Disciple worship tends to vary from place to place, there are some common forms that can be transmitted for the benefit of future generations. These might include such practices as the Lord's Prayer, the good confession (Matt. 16:16), weekly communion, and the discipline of tithing. Many groups of Elders find it beneficial themselves to meet together on a monthly basis to study the Scriptures and pray. They also find it makes sense for them to engage in service and giving to the church before they invite others to make those kinds of commitments.

The content of the Bible, the stories of the tradition, the historic practices can all serve as the means by which the community interprets its own experience, remembering who it is as it stands alongside many other religious traditions, articulating that identity in order to assure the continuance of the church in the future. Without that common past to live out of we become aimless wandering individuals instead of a pilgrim people.[23]

[23] Thomas Groome, Christian Religious Education (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 14.

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Yet, it is not enough to simply parrot what has already been said in other times and contexts. Instead, we must rediscover the meaning of our faith traditions in light of our current context. The church will become a fossilized relic if we only concern ourselves with the maintenance of tradition. Transmission must be complemented by freedom so that each new generation can reappropriate the teachings they have received for changing needs and current realities. Both continuity and flexibility are necessary if the church is to last. Without continuity, we risk losing the church's character and witness; without flexibility, we hazard becoming rigid and irrelevant.[24]

Formation by Trust in Relationship

The stories and practices of our tradition root us in our heritage, helping us know to what and to whom we belong; yet as long as we confine ourselves to learning *about* God through them, holding ourselves at arm's length, we will gain information, but we will not become Christian. That is because "what is fundamentally outside us has little relevance to us; what is separate from us cannot function to

[24] Mary Elizabeth Moore refers to the two aspects of transmission and freedom as "continuity" and "change." Rather than thinking about them in opposition to one another, she suggests viewing them together under the word "traditioning," a word which she has coined to avoid the dichotomy. See Mary Elizabeth Moore, Education for Continuity and Change (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983). See also Walter Brueggemann, 1.

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shape us."[25] Before we can begin to know what it means to be Christian, we must first be willing to step into the experience, to engage in it, to commit to it;[26] participation is primary to our understanding.

That is to say, Christianity is about a personal relationship to be entered, not a propositional truth to be considered.[27] It is not just about belief, it is about a deep, intimate trust, and such trust cannot be learned from an objective vantage point. Indeed, we have come to understand that there is no such thing as an objective vantage point. That which is known is always colored by what the knower brings to the learning experience; likewise, the knower is always affected by that which is known. In Parker Palmer's words, "to know something is to have a living relationship with it--influencing and being influenced by the object known."[28] There simply is no safe, outside vista from which to look upon and come to know real faith. We can only learn to trust by trusting.

[25] Sharon Warner, Knowing and as Intra-Experiential Affair, Ph. D. Diss., School of Theology at Claremont, 1993 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1993), 371.

[26] Warner, 17-18.

[27] Parker J. Palmer, To Know as We Are Known, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 47, 55.

[28] Palmer, xv.

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In his Epistles, the Apostle Paul describes such reliance as "living in Christ"[29] and believing that Christ "lives in us."[30] He understands that when we enter into Christ and allow Christ to enter into us, we begin to see things, not from a limited, self-centered viewpoint, but through the loving eyes of God. We come to understand the world in a new way: death is not the final word; God is present with us, actively seeking freedom and goodness for all creation, constantly percolating in our souls.

> From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor. 5:16-17)

In Christ, we gain a new perspective that brings fresh meaning to our lives and influences how we understand ourselves in relation to God.

> "In Christ,"--our lives and everything that gives them value and meaning are not absolutely located in or dependent upon what we human beings can do or create or protect. Rather. . . God present to us in Jesus Christ becomes the source of our energy, the One on whom every aspect of our lives depends and to which it is oriented.[31]

[29] See Rom. 8:1; 1 Cor. 4:10,15; 2 Cor. 5:17; 6:16; 12:19; Gal. 1:22; 2:4,20; 3:26,28; 4:6; and Col. 2:6; 3:3,11.

[30] See Rom. 8:10; 1 Cor. 3:16; and Col. 1:27; 2:11.

[31] Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, Growing in the Life of Christian Faith (Louisville: Distribution Management Services, 1989), 13.

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Living in, participating in Christ is about turning from those things which have no ultimate, lasting value or power, and investing ourselves in the Source of Life which can empower, undergird, and sustain us.

Such participation engages a person's whole being; it includes the intellect, the emotions, and the will, synthesizing them into a "self-in-community" who is able to reflect and realize what it means to believe, trust, and act as a Christian in the world.[32] In this sense, faith is not simply a set of beliefs that we Christians have; it is something we do.[33]

This kind of incarnational learning which stands at the heart of Christianity calls for a teaching ministry which concerns itself, not just with *knowing about*, but with *being*, with identity and agency in the world. In the words of Thomas Groome, the aim of Christian Education "is not simply that people know about justice, but that they be just, not only understand compassion but be compassionate, and so on."[34] That is, the purpose of the teaching

[32] Groome, Sharing Faith, 30.

[33] Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gassett has coined the term creencias, "beliefs which we are," to describe this concept:

> Creencias are those beliefs we do not produce, for which we cannot even account normally, and which we neither argue, nor spread, nor support. Ultimately we do nothing at all to these certainties of faith, we simply live "in" them.

See Warner, 12.

[34] Groome, Sharing Faith, 8.

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ministry is not just that people in our churches learn about Christianity, but that they be Christian.

As we are moved to respond in God's love, as we recognize and accept God's grace, our lives begin to become more fully immersed in Divine Presence. That immersion, in turn, shapes us. We become new creations, not just once through the conversion which accompanies our Confession of Faith, but through a life-long series of re-turnings in which we come to love God and neighbor more fully. Throughout our lifetime, it might be said "we journey from faith to faith," finding Truth and being found by it, entering into Truth and consequently being composed by it.[35]

Groome suggests such conversion is ultimately the act of falling in love with God.[36] This kind of intimate link between loving and knowing can be seen throughout the Scriptures.

> The Hebrew Bible uses the word "know" to indicate the conjugal relation of husband and wife (as in "Abraham knew Sarah"), the same word it uses for our knowledge of God and of the created world. The most common New Testament word for "know" is also used for lovemaking. The images that inform the biblical understanding of what it means to know--images of personal involvement and mutuality--are neither accidental nor antiquated. They reflect the quality of knowing at its deepest

[35] Sharon Parks, The Critical Years (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 26.

[36] Groome, Sharing Faith, 131.

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> reaches, the quality of a truth that draws us into community.[37]

In the history of the church, there have been mystics who have entered into this kind of knowledge of God directly through visions. But for most of us, God is always revealed through creaturely forms. We come to know God in our everyday relationships. On this, religious educators agree: faith and a commitment to discipleship are formed in us through relationships, through our participation in a community of faithful people.[38]

Of course, the mystery of God is far too deep for us ever to know entirely; yet it is possible for the community of the church to serve as a means of God's revelation and grace where the gospel is experienced and thereby appropriated. In such a community, learners not only come to know about God, but to know God in relationship and to know themselves as God's people, created to offer compassion, and to seek justice in the world.

Such a church opens itself to inspiration: literally, to the breathing in of the Spirit of love.[39] Through the Spirit, the community of believers can come to regard itself and the world as a "breathed on place in which we need not

[37] Palmer, 58.

[38] PCUSA, Growing in the Life, 7.

[39] Palmer, 13.

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hold our breath."[40] Such a church might be called a "community of truth": a rich and complex network of relationships in which people both speak the truth in love and make themselves accountable to each other and, ultimately, to God.[41]

In a community of truth, people bring all of who they are to the relationships that are formed in the ongoing life of the church through coffee hours, adult discussion groups, potluck suppers, service projects, choir rehearsals, Bible studies, prayer circles, committee meetings, and above all, through corporate worship by the community. There is an expectation that they will be fully present to one another, genuinely honoring each other's integrity. In such a community, there is a shared sense of responsibility for and loyalty to each other as each seeks to work out his or her own salvation "with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12b).[42]

But if being Christian depends first upon a dedication to God, a life in Christ, and a participation in the community of the church, how do novices ever *become* Christian? We know that faith commitment is a gradual process for most people; we grow in faith and discipleship

[40] Mary Brueggemann, in words spoken at a worship service at "Imagine All Things New," an Ecumenical Conference for Christian Educators, Cincinnati, Ohio, 15 February 1993.

[41] Palmer, xii.

[42] These principles of community are taken from Martin Buber, I and Thou (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1970), 87-122.

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throughout our lifetime.[43] Beginning Christians learn through something besides immediate, complete immersion in the Christian life: that's where mentors come in.

Mentors may be those intentionally sought out for counsel or advice, but more often, they serve as models for novices, even though they may have no knowledge that their words are being heard or that their actions are being watched. Beginners learn from such mentors first by vicariously projecting themselves onto such people. One example of such behavior can be seen when children imitate adults in their lives by playing "dress-up." We might say, by mimicking grown-up actions and speaking grown-up words, they are being formed in and by others.[44] In the same way,

[43] In the SEARCH Institute Study, only 7 percent of the Protestants surveyed identified conversion as a specific moment of time in their lives as compared to 47 percent who described faith as a gradual dawning. See Benson and Eklin Effective Christian Education: Report for the Christian Church, 40.

[44] The projection which takes place in the learning process is a dynamic more like dialogue than control. Sharon Warner explains:

> The subject indwells the object in order to participate in the experience-knowing. The indwelling of the object's subsidiaries constitutes an act of interiorization by which the subject comes to experience the object's own integration of its subsidiaries. But the indwelling of the object by the subject must not be construed as an objective epistemological act. In the act of indwelling, the subject participates in the object and therefore becomes an integral part of the experience-knowing. Thus, what is known by virtue of the indwelling by the subject in the object implicates the subject as well as the object.

See Warner, 382.

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novice Christians, even those who are not chronologically young, first participate in discipleship through those who exhibit more maturity in the faith. Sometimes their heroes and heroines are characters in a story; often they are the spiritual leaders in the congregation where they attend church.

The implication for the teaching ministry of Elders is obvious: others are attending to what they do and say, thereby participating in the life of Christian faith. Although there will come a time when novice Christians must struggle with the lessons they have received from their mentors in order to come to a maturity of understanding on their own, the quality of their initial formation will depend, to a large degree, on quality of faith lived by the Eldership. As Elders relate to each other on the Eldership team and as they minister to and with others in the congregation week by week, they teach what it means to be community. The more they live as a community of truth themselves, the more likely will be the formation in Christian identity and agency in others.[45]

Formation by Practice in Community

It is natural for human beings to seek security. From the time we are very young, looking to our parents for assurance and care, to the time we are old, concerning ourselves with how we will make ends meet in retirement, we

[45] Groome, Sharing Faith, 26.

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want to know we are safe and that provision has been made for our well-being. In the fragmentation of a highly mobile, diverse, often violent culture, we get anxious. Chaos, it seems, surrounds us.

We can choose to resist that chaos in two ways: the first is what Edward Farley calls "self-securing," the second is called faith.[46] In self-securing, we attempt to push back chaos using our own powers; in faith, we trust that "God alone can refuse chaos, and that God has done and continues always to do so."[47] A self-securing church does not appear to be much different from the society that surrounds it. It is caught up in an achievement mode and comes to see everything through lenses distorted by limited allegiances. It is shaped by what it strives to defend and protect.

Yet, a church which acknowledges its own participation in sin (confession) and articulates its incapacity to secure itself (repentance), recognizes, proclaims, and celebrates the establishing and sustaining power which comes from God alone (doxology).[48] In his book Life Together, Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that it is through such an attitude of contrition that authentic community is established.

[46] Edward Farley, Ecclesial Man (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 143.

[47] Craig R. Dykstra, "The Formative Power of the Congregation," Religious Education 84 (Fall 1987): 538.

[48] Dykstra, "Formative Power," 540.

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> It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their lonliness. The final breakthrough to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship with one another as the undevout, as sinners.[49]

But when sin is confessed in the presence of others,

> the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. . . the expressed, acknowledged sin loses its power. . . it can no longer tear the fellowship asunder.[50]

Through repentance, confession, and doxology, the church begins to trust God more fully, declaring not just that it is possible to live a new kind of life in the same old world, but that the world itself has been enlarged and transformed through the power of God's Spirit, that "the kingdom of God has come near." (Mark 1:15)[51]

Actually, one might say the church's whole reason for being is to symbolize that realm of God in Jesus Christ. It certainly is not the realm of God itself, nor should it be deceived into believing that it can establish such a realm on its own; the realm of God is divine gift. Jesus never said, "Go build it!"; yet, he made it clear that his

[49] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1954), 110.

[50] Bonhoeffer, 112-13.

[51] PCUSA, Growing in the Life, 14.

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disciples are in a covenantal partnership with God and one another, with responsibility to bring forth the fruits of that realm.[52] In this way, the church is called to be a "visible, credible, and effective agency of the fullness of life that God wills for all."[53]

Of course, "the church often fails to be such a sacrament and at times it actually serves as a countersign of God's reign."[54] Yet, when the church admits its ways are never ultimate, then it opens itself to change on the basis of deeper learning. A learning church is always renewing itself in God, participating more and more in the new reality that God offers, allowing beliefs, values and actions to become increasingly shaped by and conformed to that Divine realm.

Such shaping takes place, first of all, through corporate prayer, study, stewardship, service, and worship. These practices, experienced on a regular basis, serve as the means by which the church and individuals within it can resist distortions caused by sin, allowing themselves to be re-formed again and again in their created image of love. Spiritual disciplines of course do not cause trust and commitment by themselves; rather, they "create a context in

[52] Groome, Sharing Faith, 17.

[53] Groome, Sharing Faith, 394.

[54] Groome, Sharing Faith, 394.

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which faith can be awakened, supported, and challenged."[55]

By making these practices habit, the church steadies the tripod from which it views the world, increasing its ability to reflect critically on what it observes. It can augment its capacity to see evil for what it is, to recognize what the New Testament calls "principalities and powers" for what they are.[56] In a time when many other forces would shape the church's allegiance, the spiritual disciplines help a congregation make a clearer witness to the gospel of freedom.

Freedom for Christians is not only freedom from death that will be realized eternally, it is a freedom to transcend the lure of violence, bigotry, and greed which seems to be so ingrained in the fabric of human living. It is the freedom to be, not just for ourselves, but for others, bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind (Luke 4:18b).

The church can claim that freedom, to some extent, by putting itself in touch with the marginalized voices of society, those voices who are generally silenced by the powerful. Such voices can help the church engage in important self-reflection, determining where it is

[55] Richard Osmer, Teaching for Faith (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 12.

[56] PCUSA, Growing in the Life, 15. See also Rom. 8:38; Eph. 3:10, 6:12; Col. 1:16, 2:15; and Titus 3:1.

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participating in sin and seeking to reform itself in accordance with its more authentic self, created in the image of God. They can help the church find specific ways it can work to maintain and create structures and institutions that sustain life in a way that is in accordance with God's will.[57]

In this sense, the teaching ministry becomes the way the church helps

> its people see and grasp the inner character and hidden nature of its own experience as a confessing, repenting, proclaiming, praying community in response to God's gracious redeeming activity in the world.[58]

Of course, no congregation will live out that ministry perfectly. However, each one can begin wherever it is, building on the ways, even the small ways, that a community of faith enters into the practices of confession, repentance, proclamation, and prayer together. Each one can celebrate even the seemingly insignificant experiences of release from the mutually self-destructive dynamics of personal and social life that come through God's grace.[59]

The second way the church is shaped by its practice involves acts of service. As we serve, we are "en-couraged"; that is, our courage is deepened and we become

[57] Craig Dykstra, "No Longer Strangers," Princeton Seminary Bulletin 6 (1985): 197.

[58] Dykstra, "Formative Power," 545.

[59] Dykstra, "Formative Power," 544.

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less fearful and more willing to set aside our self-securing attitudes and actions. As we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, offer hospitality to the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, we enlarge our capacity for generosity (Matt. 25:35-37). Those who engage in work trips, for example, report losing their self-consciousness; as they venture further from their own familiar arena, involving themselves in caring for others, they find it becomes easier and easier to enter into unfamiliar situations without fear.

As we serve, we increase our capacity to risk. Service provides very concrete opportunities to practice living in Christ in order to come to know God more fully.[60] Loving actions bring us into deeper relationship with the Holy and, in turn, that relationship shapes us, causing us to be more loving. The book of 1 John makes a plea based on an understanding of how this cycle functions.

> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. . . if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7-8, 12b)

It is not so much that service is the product that comes after tradition is transmitted, trust is formed, and spiritual disciplines are practiced; it is that an ongoing

[60] Matt. 25: 31-46 makes the point that one relates to God through service to and for others.

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life of service itself shapes us as Christians just as do other aspects of church life.[61]

If we understand ourselves to be God's people, there is value in our action, not just because it makes us feel good, but because it calls us to a deeper understanding of God's desire for the creation, prompting us to live in ways that are more loving and whole. It is not that we relate to God and do service to and for others; it is that we relate with God *through* others.[62] Our mission is not just about social change as such, it is about evoking and nurturing a sensitivity to God's Spirit, discerning God's will, and helping to actualize God's desire for justice and harmony in our own arena of influence.

Teaching as Spiritual Formation

For better or for worse, messages about the nature of the Christian life come through the church. Such messages are communicated through everything the church says and does: through the telling of our common story, through the relationships that are forged in the community, and through the acts of devotion and service by which the church lives out its mission. To the extent that each of those three aspects of our life together point to God, the church becomes a place where people can come to know the presence

[61] Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, "Education in Congregational Context," in Rethinking Christian Education, ed. David S. Schuller (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993), 35.

[62] Moore, "Education in Congregational Context," 38.

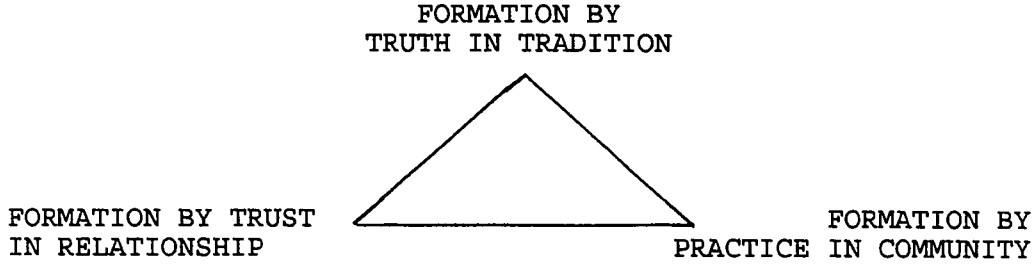
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of God; to the extent that each of those three aspects serve to invite people to participation, the church becomes a place where people can recognize and engage in the work of God's grace in the world.

When they are functioning properly, each of the three aspects support each other (as shown in Figure 2.) Each aspect is important to the church's self-understanding and witness in a confused and confusing world; none can stand alone. Tradition without relationship and practice grows dry. Relationship without tradition and practice becomes ambiguous. Practice without tradition and relationship turns to burnout.

Figure 2

Interdependence of the Three Aspects of Spiritual Formation



As we enter the twenty-first century, the question for those concerned with the continuing growth and strength of the church is not "Will the church teach?" but "*What* will the church teach?" What messages will it send to those who

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come through its doors on Sunday morning? What will it say to those who see its witness in the wider community during the week? What distinctive testimony will it make to the Gospel? These are the questions that the Eldership can help answer as they seek to learn for themselves and to offer leadership in the teaching ministry of the church.

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CHAPTER 2

Teaching at the Table

I'm gonna sit at the Welcome Table.
I'm gonna sit at the Welcome Table
One of these days, Hallelujah!
I'm gonna sit at the Welcome Table.
Gonna sit at the Welcome Table
One of these days.
Traditional Spiritual

Elders considering their role in the teaching ministry will find it necessary to address the question of content: *What* are we to teach, especially regarding who we are as church? The traditions of the first-century congregations can be helpful in such a study since Christian identity was first formed as the church gathered to worship. Theirs was a time when people were experiencing changes not unlike many we face today: growing pluralism, increased mobility, expanding global economy, growing number of moral choices. Early Christians lived in a cosmopolitan world. Greco-Roman cities, in particular, were teeming with a variety of races, religions, and languages.

The congregations that grew up in such an urban setting reflected the plurality of their culture with regard to nationality, social position, and level of education.[1] The New Testament attests to the wide variety of people who made up the Christian community. Those who are named include

[1] Wayne A. Meeks, The First Urban Christians (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.)

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Onesimus, the runaway slave, and Philemon, his wealthy owner; Lydia, the independent businesswoman dealing in luxury goods; Crispus, the former ruler of the synagogue in Corinth; Dionysius, from the governing council in Athens; and Cornelius, a Roman centurion.[2]

Yet, these assorted individuals found a common place of sustenance at the Lord's Supper, the "Sunday Dinner" where they learned together what it meant to be Christian in a confusing world. Their experience might be compared to that of William Willimon eating as a boy at his grandmother's table.

> [When I was growing up], no one had to tell me what it meant to be part of this family. No one had to tell me who I was or instruct me in the proper world view for folk with our name. I never got formal instruction in orthodox belief or behavior. No one had to explain to me that I belonged or that I was loved. I learned all that at the Sunday dinner table. If someone had asked me, "Who are your people and what do they stand for?" I would have responded quite honestly, "My people are those who gather at grandmother's dinner table." At the table we were initiated, nurtured, and claimed into the family. There we participated in common memory, fellowship, and identity. There we found our place, our name, our story.[3]

We can be grateful that Jesus did not leave the church a stack of treatises on the meaning of reconciliation,

[2] Their stories can be found in Philemon, and in Acts 10, 16, 17, 18.

[3] William Willimon, Sunday Dinner (Nashville: Upper Room, 1981), 10.

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atonement, justification, redemption or any other big, abstract, high-sounding word. Instead, he looked to humanity's hunger, that gnawing, unsatisfied, emptiness within and said, "Take; eat!"[4] Just as the early Christians were nurtured as they came around the table, so the church today finds its energy and strength by entering into communion with one another in the presence of Jesus Christ.

The first Christians learned about themselves as they gathered around the table. Because their story is also our story, we can discover something of our own identity by exploring those images which gave expression to their self-understanding. By mining the rich meaning behind the symbols of the bread and the cup, by investigating how traditions, relationships, and practices surrounding the Lord's Supper brought hope and a sense of direction to the early church, the Eldership serving the church of today can identify images that can be passed on through their leadership at the table--images that can teach what it means to be church in this chaotic age.

A Community of Blended Traditions

Imagine the Christian church of the first century gathering to worship. Since the Roman government does not recognized theirs as an official religion, civic halls are

[4] Willimon, Sunday Dinner, 72.

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off limits; Christians have to find their own place to meet.[5] Usually, the out-of-doors serves as their sanctuary for Sunday morning prayer; later that day they go to homes for a meal.[6]

Most of the time, households including close relatives, slaves, freedmen, servants, laborers, sometimes even business associates and tenants gather in several cell groups meeting simultaneously throughout a city to worship, to eat, and to learn.[7] On special occasions, these households come together as the whole church at a large home owned by wealthier members such as Aquila and Prisca (Rom. 16:3-5), Apphia and Archippus (Philem. 2), or Nympha, (Col.

[5] Dennis Smith and Hal E. Taussig, Many Tables (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990), 24.

[6] Pliny's letter to the Emperor Trajan gives witness to the Christians' practice. We might assume from his description that they recited the Ten Commandments together as part of their morning worship.

> On a fixed day, they [the Christians] were accustomed to come together before daylight and to sing by turns a hymn to Christ as a god, and they bound themselves by oath, not for some crime but that they would not commit robbery, theft, or adultery, that they would not betray a trust nor deny a deposit when called upon.

Afterwards, according to Pliny, it was their custom to "disperse and to come together again," not to practice cannibalism as was rumored, but to "partake of food of an ordinary and harmless kind." See Pliny [the Younger], "Letters," Book 10, in Letters and Panegyricus, vol 2., trans. Betty Radice, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 10.96. See also Acts 2:42,46; 20:7,11; 27:35.

[7] Abraham J. Malherbe, Social Aspects of Early Christianity (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 69.

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4:15).

Imagine servants meeting the guests at the door, washing the guests' feet and leading them to the dining room.[8] There, they recline on couches.[9] When they are settled, the servants bring around basins of water so they can wash their hands.[10] A blessing is offered. Sometimes an appetizer course is served and then everyone eats supper together.[11]

During the meal, the communion elements are distributed: the bread is broken and the cup is shared.[12] After the meal, a thanksgiving is offered and guests wash

[8] Plato, "Symposium," Dialogues, vol. 2, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 175A, 213B.

[9] Dennis Smith, "Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke," Journal of Biblical Literature 106 (1987): 623. Only free citizens were to recline; women, children and slaves were to sit when they ate.

[10] Athenaeus, The Deipnosophists, Loeb Classical Library, trans. Charles Burton Gulick (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 6:641d.

[11] Deipnosophists 4:146-147.

[12] At first, the bread and the cup were both blessed as part of the meal, not as two sacramental moments. But by the end of the second century, the bread and the cup were taken together, and the meal had disappeared entirely. In that period, the one presiding offered a prayer of thanksgiving, consecrating the elements, and the congregation responded "Amen." Then the distribution was made by the Deacons. See Justin, "Apology," in Early Christian Fathers, trans. C. C. Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 67. See also Sam K. Williams, "The Lord's Supper," Harper's Bible Dictionary, eds. Paul J. Achtemeirer et al. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 576.

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their hands again.[13] Then the group may enjoy the scent of a garland as it is passed from person to person.[14] To conclude their time together, the community sings hymns and listens to teaching.

Such customs, seen in the mind's eye, suggest that Christian meals blended together elements from both civic and religious groups in the Hellenistic world who were in the habit of eating together when they met. Professional guilds gathered around food and drink for fun, relaxation, and support.[15] Funerary societies, charged with providing burial expenses and insuring decent entombment for members who had died, provided opportunities for merchants and laborers to "get together with friends and neighbors on a regular basis to share a meal and spend an evening in each

[13] Plato, "Symposium" 176A.

[14] Deipnosophists 11.462c-d.

[15] These clubs whose members belonged to the same trade or occupation

> were a natural breeding ground for grumbling about the conduct of civic affairs and they often became involved in politics. Clubs would support candidates for local office, sponsor campaigns and post campaign slogans on the walls of local buildings.

See Robert L. Wilken, The Christians as the Romans Saw Them (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 13. Roman officials such as Trajan believed such associations were "responsible for political disturbances" in the provinces. In his correspondence with Pliny, he expressed a desire to halt their growth. See Pliny, "Letters," 34.

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other's company."[16] Religious and philosophical societies also came together around a common meal followed by speeches and a religious rite involving offerings of wine, prayers, and hymns.[17] Although each group might have been organized primarily as a guild, a burial society, or a religious cult, in reality, most associations combined several functions.[18]

Although there was a clear distinction at these gatherings between guest and servant, patron and client, the division between the secular and the sacred was not as pronounced. Those who were members of both civic and religious organizations socialized and engaged in the affairs of politics and business; those in both civic and religious organizations met "in the name of" a god or goddess who was thought to be present throughout the meal function. In many cases, special offerings of food were set aside in addition to the traditional offering of wine that was poured out for that deity who served as a patron to the group in the same way the human host served as a patron to the clients gathered around the table.[19]

[16] The bylaws of such a society in Lanuvium show that members were to take turns providing dinners including good wine, bread, sardines, place settings for each guest, and warm water with the service. See Wilken, 36.

[17] Wilken, 44.

[18] Wilken, 36.

[19] M. H. Shepherd, Jr., "The Lord's Supper" in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 3, eds. George Butterick et al (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 160.

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Meanwhile, "appointed feasts" celebrated among the Jews in Ancient Rome punctuated the seasons. The celebrations, such as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths, served as times set aside for eating and drinking and worship. Far from being solemn occasions, such communal meals were eaten with great joy.

> The eating of meat, a relatively rare occurrence in ancient Israel, and originally always having a religious significance, coupled with the drinking of wine, gave to a feast both its festal and its sacral character. . . . God was assumed to participate symbolically by receiving the choice portions of fat which were burned on the altar. . . the great feasts were occasions of "covenant renewal" at which the bonds that held Israel together as the people of God were reknit.[20]

Meals of Jewish sages with their disciples often followed an agenda similar to the Hellenistic meal while the former community adhered to a different model.[21] Jewish sages began dinner with a blessing and then the person at the head of the table broke some bread, distributed it to everyone present, and took the first bite. After the meal,

[20] J. C. Rylaarsdam, "Feasts and Fasts," in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, eds. George Buttrick et al., vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 261.

[21] See the story in Luke 7:36-50 which describes a dinner at the home of Simon the Pharisee.

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there was a blessing over a cup of wine, everyone said "Amen" and then drank from it.[22]

Certain Jewish sects also had religious practices that centered around a table fellowship. The Therapeutae, for example, were Hellenistic Jews who lived in Alexandria. According to Philo, they held a common meal on the seventh day of each week. At the end of seven weeks they put on white garments, offered prayers, and ate meat together. After the meal, they participated in a purification ritual using elements of water, bread, salt, and hyssop; they read and discussed Scripture, and then they sang hymns and songs. The feast was concluded with the breaking and distribution of bread, dancing, and a prayer of thanksgiving.[23] The community of the Essenes, likewise, participated in a meal at the beginning of each day which included aspects of worship.[24]

[22] Jean Delorme, "Last Supper and Pasch in the New Testament" in The Eucharist in the New Testament, by Jean Delorme et al, trans. E. M. Stewart (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1964), 22.

[23] Judaeus Philo, "A Treatise on a Contemplative Life," in The Essential Philo, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 4, 8.

[24] Josephus described their practice this way:

> They assemble together to one place, and when they have clothed themselves in white veils they bathe their bodies in cold water. After this purification is over they meet together in an apartment of their own into which it is not permitted to anyone of another persuasion to enter; and they themselves being pure enter the dining room as if it were some holy temple, and quietly sit down. Upon which the baker lays them loaves in

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To an outsider, some elements of the Christian table fellowship would have resembled those of a Hellenistic association meeting taking place in the presence of a deity for the purpose of recreation, mutual support and worship. Other practices would have looked like those of the Jews assembling to pray and break bread. Indeed, much of what Christians did was not unlike other groups in their culture. By making familiar customs their own, the table fellowship provided a common ground for both Gentiles and Jews, allowing them to blend their traditions together as a newly configured group.[25]

A Community Singularly Loyal to God

As they met each week, intentional instruction always went on around the table (Acts 20:7,11) in the style of the

> order, and the cook also brings a single plate of one sort of food, and sets it before everyone of them. But the priest says grace before the meal and it is unlawful to taste of the food before prayer is offered. . . . And when they have made their breakfast, he again prays over them. And when they begin, and when they end, they praise God as Him that bestoweth life. . . . After which they lay aside their white garments as holy and betake themselves to their labours again till the evening. Then they return home to supper after the same manner.

See Flavius Josephus, The Wars of the Jews, trans. William Whistow (Philadelphia: John Winston, 1847), chapt. 39.

[25] Of course the community was not without conflict. Circumcision, for example, became a particularly controversial subject as evidenced by passages such as Acts 15:1-35 and 1 Cor. 7:18-20.

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Hellenistic Symposium.[26] Justin described the practice as it took place in the second half of the second century. His account attests to the role of Scripture in the teaching.

> The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of these noble things.[27]

Tertullian gave a rather romanticized testimony to the effects of the instruction.

> With the sacred word we nourish our faith, we animate our hope, we make our confidence more steadfast; and no less by inculcation of God's precepts we confirm good habits.[28]

In reality, the instruction that took place after the meal was not always so edifying. At first, chaos reigned as all who were gathered shared lessons, revelations, ecstatic utterances, and interpretations aloud as the Spirit moved (1 Cor. 14:26). We have record things had gotten so unruly, Paul found it necessary to write to the Corinthian Church, urging them to do all things "decently and in order." (1 Cor. 14:40)

[26] The Gospel of Luke makes a point that Jesus followed the same tradition of teaching after a meal. See Luke 5:29-32; 7:36-50; 10:38-42; 11:37-54; 14:1-24; and 22:14-38.

[27] Justin, "Apology," 67.

[28] Tertullian, Apology, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1950), 39.

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What did Christians learn about their identity through the intentional teaching that occurred around the table? They came to know themselves, not as a new group with no history, but as a community living in the continuity of Jewish monotheistic theology, tradition, and writing. In this regard, Christians were to shun idolatry. Eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols at a social occasion was one thing, but Paul made it clear the Lord's Supper of the church was to be the only table worship permitted for Christians (1 Cor. 10:14-33). Even though, for Paul, idols had no real existence in and of themselves (1 Cor. 8:4), he believed there was demonic power behind them of which Christians could have no part.

> I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. (1 Cor. 10:20b-21)

In keeping with Jewish monotheistic tradition, Paul made it clear that Christian thanks and praise was to be for God alone. Deepening their understanding of God as the provider and sustainer of all that is, they were to put aside their own self-securing striving and to trust the Divine presence as the source of hope and power. They were to love God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength (Luke 10:27), making that relationship the most important one in their lives, arranging all of their

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activities in relation to the Divine purpose, allowing God's Spirit to work through them in new ways.

A Community Living God's Realm

Besides the explicit instruction regarding the Scriptures, teaching around the Lord's Table also took place through the prayers. The set form of those blessings spoken over the bread and the cup and the thanksgiving offered at the end of the meal paralleled that of the traditional Jewish prayers which Jesus, as any Jew, would have given.[29] We can see the similarity by comparing the *Kiddush*, the *'Amidah*, and the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* with the *Didache*, a document containing one of the earliest Christian prayers spoken at the Lord's Table. (See Figure 3.)

The images these prayers present show that Christians understood themselves as the community in which God's promises were being actualized. The bread and the cup were associated with eternal life.[30]

> A historical revelation from the past (covenant) became a presently realized revelation (holy name) lodged in the heart. Knowledge took the place of Torah, and faith took the place of food. Life became eternal life already made known.[31]

[29] John Riggs, "From Gracious Table to Sacramental Elements," Second Century 4, no. 2 (1984): 95.

[30] "The *Didache*," in Early Christian Fathers, trans and ed. C. C. Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 10:1-5.

[31] Riggs, 94.

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Figure 3

Comparing the *Didache* to Traditional Jewish Prayers

KIDDUSH Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.	DIDACHE (9.1) Concerning the thanksgiving, give thanks like this: (9.2) First, concerning the cup: We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant, which you have made known to us through Jesus your servant. To you is glory forever.
KIDDUSH Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe who brings forth bread from the earth.	(9.3) Concerning the broken bread: We thank you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you have made known to us through Jesus your servant. To you is glory forever.
'AMIDAH Sound the great horn for our freedom, and lift up the ensign to gather together our exiles, and gather us together from the four winds of the earth. Blessed are You, O Lord, who gathers the banished of your people Israel.	(9.4) Just as this broken bread was scattered on the mountains and gathered together became one, so let your church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. For yours is the glory and power forever.
BIRKAT HA-MAZON (1) Blessed are You, O Lord, King of the Universe, who feeds the whole earth with goodness, with grace, and with mercy. Blessed are You, O Lord, who feeds all.	(10.1) After you have finished the meal, give thanks like this: We thank you holy Father, for your holy name which you have lodged in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and eternal life which you have made known to us. Glory to you forever.

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(2) We thank You, O Lord, our God, that You have caused us to inherit a goodly and pleasant land, the covenant, the Torah, life and food. For all these things we thank Thee and praise thy name for ever and ever. Blessed are You, O Lord, for the land and for the food.	(10.3) You, Lord almighty, created all things for the sake of your name; you have given food and drink to people for their enjoyment, but to us you have graciously given spiritual food and drink and eternal life. For all these things we thank you because you are mighty, Glory to you forever. Amen.
(3) Have mercy, O Lord, our God, on your people, Israel, and on your city Jerusalem and on your Temple and your dwelling-place and on Zion your resting-place, and on the great and holy sanctuary over which your name was called, and the kingdom of the dynasty of David may you restore to its place in our days, and build Jerusalem soon. Blessed are you, O Lord, who builds Jerusalem.	(10.5) Lord, remember to keep you church from all evil and perfect it in your love; gather it from the four winds into your kingdom which you have prepared for it. For power and glory are yours forever. Amen.

The comparison of these traditional prayers is taken from John Riggs, "From Gracious Table to Sacramental Elements: The Tradition-History of *Didache* 9-10," Second Century 4, no. 2 (1984): 92-93.

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Christians came to know themselves as people being harvested into God's realm (*Didache* 10:5). As time passed, this self-understanding became even more explicit in the prayers of the *Didache* (*Didache* 9:2-4). There, the reference was clearly to the "gathering in" of the nations in the final days to the mountain of the Lord (Isa. 25:6-10a). The scene in the Hebrew text, appropriately enough, was the Messianic Banquet, a feast set for all people (Isa. 25:6) in a time when death and tears would be no more (Isa. 25:7-8), when God would be recognized (Isa. 25:9), justice would prevail (Isa. 65:20-23) and peace would reign (Isa. 65:25). In these final days, humanity would no longer be dependent on imperfect teachers or judges; God would teach and arbitrate for the nations (Isa. 2:2).

As guests dining on earth, Christians came to a new spiritual understanding of themselves as Christ's guests, dining with the Divine Host at the Messianic Banquet in the new realm of God. They began to understand their community as a foretaste of God's new realm. As they learned to trust one another, they discovered Christ had, indeed "broken down the dividing wall" (Eph. 2:14b). They were no longer strangers or aliens, but sisters and brothers, "members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). It was no small miracle: the new realm of God lived among them.

As the community continued to reflect on their identity as banquet guests, we can imagine that they began to think

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how Jesus had appropriated the symbolism to his own teaching.[32] With the coming of the one who proclaimed the advent of God's new community, the visible meal became a symbol of an invisible reality. But unlike Hellenistic meals in which the wine was poured out for the deity, Christians came to understand themselves as the ones who were honored and loved by a God who poured out the offering for them.

A Community of Equal Souls

Eating with others in ancient Mediterranean Culture was a way of establishing trust, of defining group boundaries, and of expressing relationship. However, that is not to say the relationship was always commensurate in terms of social rank. Inviting friends and clients to dine was a way for a patron to display his or her power and to develop a sense of indebtedness among the guests.[33] In most cases, those who were invited to the meal were actually arranged around the table according to their standing in regard to the host, the most honored guest being the one to the right of the one

[32] See Matt. 8:11, 22:2, 25:10; and Luke 22:29-30.

[33] Halvor Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts," in The Social World of Luke-Acts (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishing, 1991), 242, 244-50.

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presiding at the meal.[34] Such a tribute often bought favors; a pay-back was expected.[35]

Although status in the Mediterranean world was defined largely by the patron/client system and status in the Jewish community was defined largely by the purity codes, worth in the church was defined by other criteria.[36] Since Christians understood themselves as citizens of another realm not ruled by an earthly emperor, they were free to set aside the visible standards of status. In the material world, inequality was obvious, but in spiritual terms, it was irrelevant. Those who dwelt in the Spirit understood the reality that, in spite of outward appearances, all souls were equal before God.

The model for their community became the table fellowship initiated by Jesus during his lifetime in which he ate and drank with those who would have been considered outcasts by their culture. Jesus disregarded the purity

[34] Plutarch, "Dinner of the Seven Wise Men," in Moralia, vol. 2, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 148A-149F. In this fictional story, Plutarch discusses the custom of ranking when one of the characters expresses insult at the position offered. He also cites examples of ranking in "Table Talk," Moralia, vol. 3, 616A-617B. The ranking of guests is also described at the banquet of Agathon in Plato, "Symposium," 177A-E.

[35] Moxnes, "Patron-Client," 245.

[36] See Jerome H. Neyrey, "The Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel," Semeia 35 (1986): 91-125. This article gives a summary of the social boundaries that were drawn according to geography, time, adherence to the law, and physical wholeness.

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codes by touching the unclean, healing on the Sabbath, and often ignoring dietary restrictions. The mass feedings described in Mark 6:37-44 and 8:1-10 are but one example of how Jesus

> showed no concern for the purity of the folk with whom he ate or for any of the rituals to be practiced prior to eating. Common food was shared with common folk on common ground.[37]

Through his entire ministry, Jesus made it clear that

> all people are welcome to live as participants in God's reign. He had, however, a special outreach and compassion toward the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized. He radicalized its law of love--that we love God by loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, with neighbor unlimited--as the only measure of membership in God's reign.[38]

Jesus also subverted the structures of inequality that held the patronage system together by deliberately inviting those people to dinner who had no means by which to reciprocate. Although his actions would have raised eyebrows of those wondering what kind of "pay-back" he might be receiving, Jesus nevertheless called tax collectors and

[37] Neyrey, "Idea of Purity," 108-09.

[38] Groome, Sharing Faith, 16. Jesus' particular concern for the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast is made especially explicit in the Gospel of Luke. See Luke 4:18-19; 6:20-26; 7:22; and 14:15-24.

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sinners "friends," proclaiming the dignity and worth of all people in the sight of God.[39]

He called guests and hosts alike to humble themselves instead of using their status or wealth to claim power over others (Luke 14:7-14). In Luke's version of his sermon, Jesus named the poor, the hungry, the mournful, and the excluded as those who would receive special blessing (Luke 6:20-22). In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus he taught about a time in the future when value would not be judged by material wealth (Luke 16:19-31), when the first would be last and the last first.[40]

As a result of Jesus' teachings, the Christian church came to understand itself as an inclusive, open community. The parable of the Royal Marriage Feast became symbolic of its mission to extend "it's meal invitation to society's outcasts just as Jesus did (and would do at the end-time)."[41] The church was motivated to do this, not just out of charity (although Christians certainly understood themselves as those called to feed and clothe the needy), but also out of a desire to embody the invisible equality of all souls before God, even amid the visible inequality so apparent in their society.

[39] See Mark 2:13-17; Matt. 9:9-13, 11:19; and Luke 6:34, 7:34, 15:1-2, 19:1-10.

[40] See Thom. 4; Mark 10:31; Matt. 20:16; and Luke 13:30.

[41] Smith, 637. See also Thom. 64; Luke 14:15-24; Matt. 22:1-14.

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A Community of Unity

For the early Christians the significance of the meal lay, not in actions which could be seen in the world of tangible flesh, but in the unseen world of the Spirit of which Christians all were citizens (Eph. 2:19). The ability to discern the true meaning of what they were doing together came as a gift from God. Paul wrote:

> Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. . . . Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:12,14)

In the tangible world of the flesh, human empires ruled, status and wealth determined worth, and differences divided; in the world of the Spirit, God ruled, all souls stood with dignity in the Divine presence, and God's Spirit bound together variety into a common unity.

We can see that this unity was the standard for the table fellowship by Paul's strong reaction to its absence in the Corinthian community.

> When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? (1 Cor. 11:20-22a)

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It seemed the Corinthians had fallen into the Hellenistic practice of "elegant economy." That is, the hosts were setting the best dishes in front of a select few and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company, and were serving different grades of wine in different flasks according to the various "grades" of friends.[42] Archaeological evidence suggests the cramped quarters of the home may have heightened the temptation to divide those who dined at the Lord's Table into various classes as the church grew.[43]

For Paul, the Corinthian practices were not just a matter of hurting a few people's feelings; creating special

[42] Pliny, "Letters," 2:6.

[43] The mere fact that all could not be accommodated in the triclinium [about 55 square meters] meant that there had to be an overflow into the atrium [about 36 square meters]. It became imperative for the host to divide his guests into two categories: the first-class believers were invited into the triclinium while the rest stayed outside. Even a light knowledge of human nature indicates the criterion used. The host must have been a wealthy member of the community and so he invited into the triclinium his closest friends among the believers, who would have been of the same social class. The rest could take their places in the atrium where conditions were greatly inferior. Those in the triclinium would have reclined, as was the custom (1 Cor. 8:10). . . whereas those in the atrium were forced to sit. (1 Cor. 13:30).

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, St. Paul's Corinth (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1983), 156, 158.

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cliques went against the very identity of the church as Christ's body. (1 Cor. 6:15)[44] Visibly diverse, the community was to live out the invisible reality of its oneness.[45] Any attempt at securing personal privilege was to be rejected. God's will for the church was not individualistic; it did not promote selfishness or exclusivity. On the contrary, because God wanted wholeness for all instead of just for some, community was primary: no human being was to live up to his or her potential at the expense of another; the well-being of the one was bound up in the well-being of the many. Christians were to understand themselves to be "members of one another" (Eph. 4:25b).

A Community in Touch with Power

Paul held up an ideal of unity for the church, yet he recognized not all Christians showed the maturity needed to live as spiritual people; levels of commitment and

[44] In contrast to Paul, Justin understood the role of Christians, not as the body itself, but as the *soul* of the body:

> To put it simply: What the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and the Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the world but does not belong to the world. . . . The soul is shut up in the body, and yet itself holds the body together; while Christians are retained in the world as in a prison, and yet themselves hold the world together.

See Justin, "Apology," 213-19.

[45] People from all economic strata, as well as Gentiles and Jews, ate together (Acts 11:2-3).

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understanding varied within the early church as they do in the church today. Although some had become Christians out of personal choice, it was not uncommon for family members or clients to be incorporated into the community merely because a patriarch or matriarch with whom they were associated had taken the name Christian.[46]

Even some who had come to the Christian life by their own intention Paul described as "infants in Christ," unable to discern the Spirit. Because of their continued attachment to the world of the flesh (1 Cor. 3:1), they were unable to eat and drink with proper regard. They did not understand the special significance of their actions.

Paul warned about partaking of the bread and the cup without knowledge, explaining some had become weak and ill, and others had even died because they did not participate with proper reverence (1 Cor. 1:30). Such counsel pointed to the belief that the elements were vehicles of power, connecting earthly existence with the realm of the Holy.

Yet, there was some discrepancy when it came to understanding the exact nature of that power. Distinctive interpretations are apparent in the four accounts of the Last Supper that have served as a basis for the "Words of Institution" in the church.

> The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and

[46] See Acts 16:15, 16:31-34, 18:8; and 1 Cor. 1:16, 16:15.

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said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Cor. 11:23b-25)

While they were eating he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." (Mark 14:22-25)

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matt. 26:26-29)

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper,

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> saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:14-20)

Where all four accounts perceive the elements to be part of a new covenant with God, only the passages in 1 Corinthians and in Luke lift up the memorial aspect to the meal. The account in Matthew is unique in emphasizing the forgiveness of sins while Mark, Matthew, and Luke all refer to the partaking of bread and wine as an anticipation of the future realization of God's realm.

Although the interpretation of the meal's meaning expanded and evolved over time, by the end of the second century, it was clear that the community equated the bread and the cup with the saving, sustaining power of the "real presence" of Christ.[47] Justin explained:

> For we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but as Jesus Christ our Saviour, being incarnate by God's word took flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food consecrated by the word of prayer which comes from him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation, is the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus.[48]

Each week, the church participated in communion by taking in the presence of the risen Christ as part of their continued formation in faith. Each week, they remembered

[47] World Council of Churches, Commission on Faith and Order, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 20.

[48] Justin, "Apology," 66.

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through the sharing of bread and wine how Jesus gave over his body and blood as a means for God's self-giving love. Like a common criminal, he had been executed; no divine power had intervened to provide a rescue. Jesus had been left to suffer the death-dealing consequences of human freedom. Later, the early church came to understand how God had participated in the reality of suffering and death through the cross in the embodiment of Jesus, transforming destruction to life.[49]

[49] Thomas Groome writes,

> Since the beginning of the church, orthodox Christian faith has affirmed that the Jesus event has significantly changed our human condition, augmenting its potential for fullness of life and orienting us effectively toward God and God's intentions for us. But from the beginning too the church has struggled to express this transformation in language meaningful for different times and places. Subsequently there emerged three major "models" for understanding the work of Jesus *for us*.
>
> (1) The "classic" model images Jesus as the *Savior* who has saved humankind from the powers of evil and conquered the principalities that threaten to destroy us.
>
> (2) The Latin or "satisfaction" model images Jesus as the *Redeemer* who buys humankind back from bondage and pays the price for its sins by making satisfaction to God's justice.
>
> (3) The third . . . is that Jesus as "Divinizer" has restored the divine image to humanity that was wounded or lost by original sin and is the catalyst for us living into our full potential for God.

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Christ was their power. Paul spoke clearly about the matter: God was in Christ, reconciling the world to the Divine Self (2 Cor. 5:19). Because Jesus' mission involved reconciliation; that is, mending brokenness, the early Christians began to view themselves as those who were called to love the outcast and to be a vehicle of healing and grace in the world as well. One way they did that was to take the consecrated food to those who were absent from the gathering due to illness.[50] They believed the sacred elements had the power to heal.[51]

A Community of Servants

By their service to those unable to attend the gathering, Christians developed an understanding of their community as one bound to righteous living. Self-examination followed the teaching that took place after the supper. Those who gathered were to search their souls, judging themselves as to unrighteous conduct (1 Cor. 11:28, 31).[52] For them, moral living included economic aid for those in need.

See Groome, Sharing Faith, 22-23.

[50] Justin, "Apology", 67.

[51] Ignatius, Epistle to the Ephesians, trans. Kirsopp Lake (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1912), 20:1. In this passage, Ignatius refers to the Eucharist as the "medicine of immortality."

[52] Later, this self-examination was formalized as the meal celebration evolved into a more liturgical rite: confession became preparation for the Eucharist. See "The *Didache*," 14, 22.

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The book of Acts reports that the early church held "all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45), with special attention being given to the community's daily allocation of food to widows (Acts 6:1-7). By treating each person with dignity and care, they came to denounce the evil which objectified human beings through categories of "us" and "them." By promoting the well-being of even "the least" among them, the community was acting in opposition to the oppressive systems of power present in their society.[53]

In satirizing the way Christians cared for Peregrinus who was apprehended and jailed, the comic Lucian, writing in the first century, also ended up attesting to the seriousness with which the church understood itself as a community who cared for others:

[53] Two centuries later, Tertullian described how the offering had evolved into a voluntary giving by individuals and defended how the funds were spent.

> On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are, as it were, piety's deposit fund. For they are not taken thence and spent on feasts and drinking-bouts and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house, such too as have suffered shipwreck: and if there happen to be any in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church, they become the nurslings of their confession.

See Apology, 39.

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> When he had been imprisoned, the Christians, regarding the incident as a calamity, left nothing undone in the effort to rescue him. Then, as this was impossible, every other form of attention was shown him, not in a casual way but with assiduity; and from the very break of day aged widows and orphan children could be seen waiting near the prison while their officials even slept inside with him after bribing the guards. Then elaborate meals were brought in, and sacred books of theirs were read aloud. . . . Indeed, people came even from the cities in Asia, sent by the Christians at their common expense, to succour and defend and encourage the hero. . . . much money came to him from them by reason of his imprisonment and he procured not a little revenue from it. . . they despised all things indiscriminately and considered them common property. . . . if any charlatan and trickster able to profit by occasions, came among them, he quickly acquired sudden wealth by imposing upon simple folk.[54]

Serving the meal for the table fellowship became a symbol of the community's servant identity in the world.[55] Just as the deacons waited upon those gathered for the meal, so the church waited upon the wider community. The writers of the Gospels wanted Christians to understand themselves as slaves of Jesus Christ who were to be "dressed for action" with their "lamps lit," alert to the return of their master who would reward their faithfulness by bending down and serving them (Luke 12:35-37). Until the end came, the one

[54] Lucian, "The Passing of Peregrinus," in The Works of Lucian, trans. A. M. Harmon, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 13, 15.

[55] Smith, 630.

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who served was the one who offered the true worship (Luke 7:36-50).

As Christians received the bread and cup as God's gifts, the community came to understand its very existence as gift as well--a gift caused by the outpouring of God's Spirit, not by any human accomplishment (Acts 2). As a result, the community taught the importance of sharing wealth and possessions as a response to Divine providence; Christians were to understand those who gave of themselves to be the greatest in the eyes of God.[56]

Early Christian Identity

Although their table fellowship blended together many of the customs of Hellenistic and Jewish meals, we can see that, over time, Christians came to perceive their unique identity in contrast to that of other groups in their society. In continuity with its Judaic heritage, the church learned it was to be a community singularly loyal to God, called to righteous living through the love of neighbor. As Christians ate and drank together each week, their understanding of the meaning behind their actions deepened; they came to know Jesus Christ in fresh ways (Luke 24:35). Through the meal, they sealed their covenant with God and with one another and began to consider themselves guests of

[56] See Luke 12:42-46; Matt. 24:45-51; 25:14-30; and Luke 19:12-27; 22:25-27.

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Jesus Christ, dining at the Messianic Banquet in the realm of God.

As members of this new community, "their eyes were opened" (Luke 24:31) and they grew in the understanding of the spiritual power available to them though their participation in the Lord's Supper. They came to understand the importance of living out a different social reality from that of their culture. The boundaries of their group were drawn by moral behavior and not by status or wealth. They believed all members of the community to be of equal worth in the eyes of God. They recognized the importance of practicing hospitality and of embodying unity in the midst of diversity.

For these early Christians, the table was a place of teaching. Everything they did together--from reading the scriptures to the prayers, from the offering to the shared stories, from the Words of Institution to the hymns, from the service of the deacons to the sharing of the communal elements, from the make-up of the gathered community to the distribution of bread and wine to those who were sick--the Lord's Supper was the loom that wove the church's identity.

In our own day, as the Eldership presides each Sunday over the Lord's Supper, they teach as well. By their mere presence at the table alongside the pastor, they convey the importance of partnership between laity and clergy in the service of Christ. Through the words they use in the call

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to offering, the invitation to the table, the communion meditation, the prayers of blessing, or the prayers of thanksgiving, they paint pictures of the nature of God, of Jesus Christ, and of the church.

If the style of the Elders is rigid and cold, the meal will seem like a distasteful repast of hardtack and thin soup instead of a full-bodied banquet. If they drone on and on with lengthy explanations, communion will become an exercise in tedium rather than a participation in the power of God. If their language suggests that the Lord's Supper is primarily a private time for "Jesus-and-me," the community will miss the opportunity to practice re-membering the Body of Christ. If the Elders always read what someone else has written rather than speaking from the heart, the bread and the cup will seem to be generic commodities rather than personal gifts. If the names used to address God are always the same, the church will miss the rich variety of God's revelation.

Yet, if the Eldership participates fully in the experience of communion themselves, if they prayerfully prepare themselves to preside at the table, if they set aside their self-consciousness in favor of concern for those who have come looking for sustenance, they can join with Christ in offering grace, receiving it themselves in the process. As Elders come to know the gifts of God, they themselves can become gift to others through their spiritual

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leadership. As they experience Christ's presence, they can embody the Spirit in the world.

In the free tradition of worship in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), there are no prescribed obligations placed on the Eldership as to the form or content of the prayers at the Lord's Table. However, the outline suggested in Figure 4 may be used as a guide in composing blessings which are brief and sensitive to the theme of the service and the season of the church year (Advent, Lent, Pentecost, etc.)

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Figure 4

Suggested Outline
for Elders' Prayer(s) of Blessing
Over the Bread and Cup

(1) THE ADDRESS: In this part of the prayer, God is addressed by a name which reflects the focus of the whole worship service and is honored for particular attributes and actions. (See Figure 5 for a partial listing of images of God taken from scripture.)

Examples:
- o Creator God who made the heavens and cares for the earth. . .
- o Compassionate God who offers us forgiveness when we fail. . .
- o O God of Hope, who frees us from our fears. . .

(2) THE THANKSGIVING: In this part of the prayer, the Elders express gratitude on behalf of the congregation for the love and mercy of God, particularly as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Examples:
- o We give thanks for the gift of your son Jesus who humbled himself as a servant.
- o Thank you for your constant love, even in times of brokenness and pain.
- o We come to this table in thanksgiving for Jesus the Christ who poured out his life that we might live.

(3) THE MEMORIAL: In this part of the prayer, the church remembers its story, especially the story of God's saving power through the Elder's words.

Examples:
- o At this table, we remember Jesus Christ who called disciples to follow him.
- o We remember the great love you showed us through the gift of Jesus Christ.
- o Today we remember how you called a people out of slavery into freedom.

(4) CALLING ON THE HOLY SPIRIT: In this part of the prayer, the bread and cup are blessed by name and the Elder calls upon the Holy Spirit to be present in the meal so that those who partake may discern the holiness of the elements.

Examples:
- o Let your Spirit come upon this bread and cup that they may be food for our journey.

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- o Bless this bread and this cup so we may be aware of your presence in this meal.
- o May your Spirit be present in these simple elements of bread and cup so they truly will become spiritual nourishment for your church.

REDEDICATION: In this part of the prayer, the people in the worshipping community have a chance to rededicate themselves through the words of the Elder to God and to God's work.

Examples:

- o We offer ourselves once again to your service, praying in the name of Christ Jesus, Amen.
- o Open our hearts as we eat and drink that we may be renewed by your presence among us.
- o As we are nourished by this bread and cup, may we go from this place of worship to serve our neighbor.

The following is an example of a prayer appropriate to the season of Advent which follows the outline:

THE ADDRESS	O God of Love whose coming we await,
THE THANKSGIVING	we give you thanks for this season of stillness when our thoughts can turn to you.
THE MEMORIAL	At this table, we remember your son who opened his heart completely to your will.
CALLING ON THE HOLY SPIRIT	We asked that we may be open to the presence of your Spirit in the bread and in the cup that we share
REDEDICATION	so, in the example of Jesus, we may more fully live according to your will. Amen.

This outline is adapted from Keith Watkins, The Feast of Joy (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1977), 116.

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Figure 5
Images of God in Scripture

This list is not meant to be exhaustive; rather it is meant to be suggestive of the many names by which God can be addressed in Elders' prayers at the Lord's Table.

Healer

Eternal One

Powerful One

Mystery

One Who Calls

Challenger

Still, Small Voice

Teacher

Immanuel

Servant

Judge

King

Ruler of All

Mother Hen

Bakerwoman

Wisdom

Just One

Comforter

Holy One

Gracious One

Giver of Life

Creator

Breath

Giver of Hope

One Who Suffers

Parent

Liberator

Lover

One Who Builds

One Who Seeks

Precious One

Lover

Presence

Wholly Other

Evening Breeze

Light

Father

Mother

Add Others You Find:

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As the Eldership today looks backwards to the Messianic hope of the Jews, the teachings of Jesus, and the writings of the early Christian church, as they look forward, anticipating a time when God's promises will be fulfilled in the complete renewal of creation, they can come to know the signs of God's realm. It is God's realm that can provide both a memory and a hope of what the church is to be: a body which gives thanks for the signs of God's grace, revealing that grace through its life and work in the world.

As a means of that grace, the bread and the cup connect the "already" with the "not yet," making God's realm newly present "on earth as it is in heaven."

> For the world which God has reconciled is present at every eucharist: in the bread and wine, in the persons of the faithful, and in the prayers they offer for themselves and for all people. . . . The eucharist thus signifies what the world is to become: an offering and a hymn of praise to the Creator, a universal communion in the Body of Christ, a kingdom of justice, love and peace in the Holy Spirit.[57]

As the Elders lead the church each Sunday morning in partaking of the loaf and the cup, the community can come to understand that

> we are members of a body, not only when we choose to be, but in our whole existence. Every member serves the whole body, either to its health or to

[57] WCC, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, II:A:4.

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> its destruction. This is no mere theory; it is a spiritual reality.[58]

Through common worship, the church can discover its relatedness. As we deepen that relationship with one another, as we share in building a community of wholeness, we can change and grow. Our perceptions can become tuned to God's purposes rather than our own. We can discover that our common humanity "is not an ideal which we must realize, but a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."[59]

[58] Bonhoeffer, 89.

[59] Bonhoeffer, 30.

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CHAPTER 3

Teaching in Life's Transitions

So high, you can't go over it.
So low, you can't go under it.
So wide, you can't go around it.
You gotta go in by the door.
Traditional Spiritual

Alice sat across the table from one of the Elders in her church. "I don't know what's wrong with me," she said. "Since the children have all gone, I've been asking myself the same sorts of questions I asked as a teenager. Who am I--I mean, outside of being a wife and a mother? What does God want me to do with the rest of my life? It's all so confusing!"

She may not have recognized it, but Alice was entering into a new phase of her life. She was undergoing a transition. A transition is a normal part of growth which involves change. Although it may be brought about by an outward alteration in circumstances, transition means inner transformation: a reformation of who we are in light of new truth, a journey from the disorientation of an ending to the reorientation of a beginning.[1]

Transitions are spiritual in that they hold the potential to open us up to the workings of God. Just as the

[1] William Bridges suggests that a transition involves three phases he calls "ending," the "neutral zone," and "beginning." See William Bridges, Transitions (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1980).

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Holy Spirit could not come until Jesus went away, (John 16:7) so it seems change is often required for the Spirit of Truth to enter into our lives in order to teach us that which we need to learn.[2]

Transitions provide natural "learning points" for growing in faith and discipleship, both for individuals and for congregations.[3] Learning points are times when we find ourselves spiritually homeless: when that which has served as familiar shelter and protection simply is not there anymore; when the self-securing patterns of meaning which have been our foundation in the past are gone; when we acknowledge we are, indeed, lost.

Whether these learning points lead to conversion, to a realignment of loyalties, whether they motivate Christians to act in new ways depends on a number of things.

> If the people in the situation are overwhelmed by the moment, if they are unwilling to accept the opportunity within the challenge, . . . the moment may pass with nothing to show but a papered-over crack in the wall. Similarly, if the people are burned out emotionally or have used up all their resources, they cannot rise to the occasion and use the learning point as a moment for change. . . . [Learning points] are scary and threatening for people who lead congregations. They bring out all kinds of defensiveness ("Nobody can tell us what to do"), anger ("If so-and-so hadn't messed up, we

[2] See John 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:8-14.

[3] The term "learning points" is used by the Alban Institute. See Mead, 71.

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> wouldn't be in this [situation]"), depression ("I give up") and a host of less palatable behaviors.[4]

That is to say, it is fear and not ignorance which is the enemy of learning.[5] Learning points can only become convictional moments of conversion that fuel the rest of our commitments when fear loses its power.

Elders have a particular opportunity to nurture the spiritual health of those within the congregation. They can aid in alleviating much of the fear that keeps those in the church from growing in faith and discipleship, first of all by addressing that fear in themselves, and secondly, by coming to understand the transition process more fully so it can be viewed, not as a threat, but as an opportunity for deeper trust and creative action.

Although transitions can differ as to length, intensity, and content, most follow a somewhat predictable pattern. The pattern is not a modern invention. Its stages can be traced even through the plots of ancient stories that deal with leaving the familiar and setting out for unknown parts. In analyzing such plot structures in conjunction with the fields of science, art, and psychology, James Loder, an educator, clinical psychologist, and theologian, summarizes the pattern's movement in five steps.

[4] Mead, 71.

[5] Palmer, xi.

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Figure 6

James Loder's Phases of Life Transition

1. A RESTLESS INCOHERENCE
 brought about by new experience which stands in opposition to what we assumed to be true. In this stage, we become aware of a tension between our need for internal harmony and the sense that something is just not fitting.

2. AN INTERLUDE FOR SCANNING
 in which we put the conflict out of consciousness, but not out of mind. This is a stage of relaxed concentration when we randomly, almost passively explore possible ways to resolve the tension we feel. The interlude itself may last for only a few seconds or for many years.

3. AN INSIGHT FELT WITH INTUITIVE FORCE,
 an "ah-ha" experience in which we are surprised with a larger, wholly new outlook that comes to us from beyond ourselves, simplifying and unifying the elements that have been in conflict. In this stage, the tension is not only constructively resolved, but we become "new creations."

4. A PERIOD OF RELEASE AND REPATTERNING
 in which energy once invested in and bound by the inner conflict is made available for creative action in light of the new insight.

5. A TIME OF INTERPRETATION AND VERIFICATION
 in which we see what others think, submitting our new way of viewing the world to public test and trying to live as "our new self" back in community.[6]

[6] Adapted from James E. Loder, The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 3-4.

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Loder's outline mirrors the traditional form of many folk tales and epic myths which humanity has used to teach itself through the ages. In this pattern, transition is seen as

> a pilgrimage from assumed ways of seeing, knowing, acting, and trusting, through curiosity, bewilderment, and dissolution toward a larger generosity, a deeper trust, a finer wisdom.[7]

One story from the Bible that illustrates the stages of transition is Luke's telling of the incident on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24:13-35).[8]

1. A Restless Incoherence is felt as the travelers walk along. They had hoped that Jesus was the one who would redeem Israel, but with the crucifixion, their hopes have been shattered. There is a gathering darkness on the road as they brood over their situation.

> They do not recognize that the conflict they feel is not fundamentally derived from their broken hopes for Israel, but from the fact they had inadequate hopes for Israel to begin with.[9]

2. An Interlude for Scanning occurs in which the travelers open themselves up to the teaching of the one who has joined them. They do not engage in debate, in fact the story gives the impression that they listen almost passively

[7] Parks, 30.

[8] See Loder, 97-112 for an in-depth discussion of this story.

[9] Loder, 100.

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to what the stranger has to say (although later they report their hearts were burning as he spoke to them on the road.) (Luke 24:32.)

3. An Insight Felt With Intuitive Force takes place when Jesus breaks the bread after having been invited into the house. Their eyes are opened and they experience an "ah-ha" of "seeing," not the "unrecognized visible Presence" who talked with them on the road, but the "recognized invisible Presence" in their midst.[10]

4. A Period of Release and Repatterning ensues in which energy once invested in and bound by the inner conflict is made available for immediate travel back to Jerusalem.

5. A Time of Interpretation and Verification transpires in which the men and women gathered in Jerusalem give testimony to the appearance of the Lord to Simon and the travelers share their own story of how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

In Luke's story, the transition is completed all in one day with the characters moving smoothly through the steps; yet in real life, transitions are rarely that quick and easy. In truth, we often do not move through the stages of the transition process at all, choosing instead to take detours which keep us from changing and growing. Also, although Loder recognizes the role humans play in inviting

[10] Loder, 101.

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transformation to take place, his model seems to downplay an element that Christians have long recognized as part of the conversion process: a specific act of letting go that takes place between steps one and two, an acknowledgment that we cannot come to a resolve of our own power.[11]

Figure 7 offers a graphic representation of the transition process, including the detours human beings often take. It follows the plot of our own Exodus story which allows us to see in concrete terms what the model describes in the abstract. As an example of a transition experience of a whole people journeying from slavery to freedom, it is a story that can aid Elders in becoming more competent in identifying each of the phases which make up the patterned process of inner transformation.

Phases of Life Transition: The Exodus Story

1. The Point of Challenge

Transitions begin with an experience of truth that challenges our current reality. For the Israelites who had come to view slavery in the brickyard of Egypt as the normal way of the world, Moses became that challenge, confronting their beliefs about who they were and how things were to be. After his call to freedom, we can imagine that the brickyard never looked quite the same to them. The point of challenge

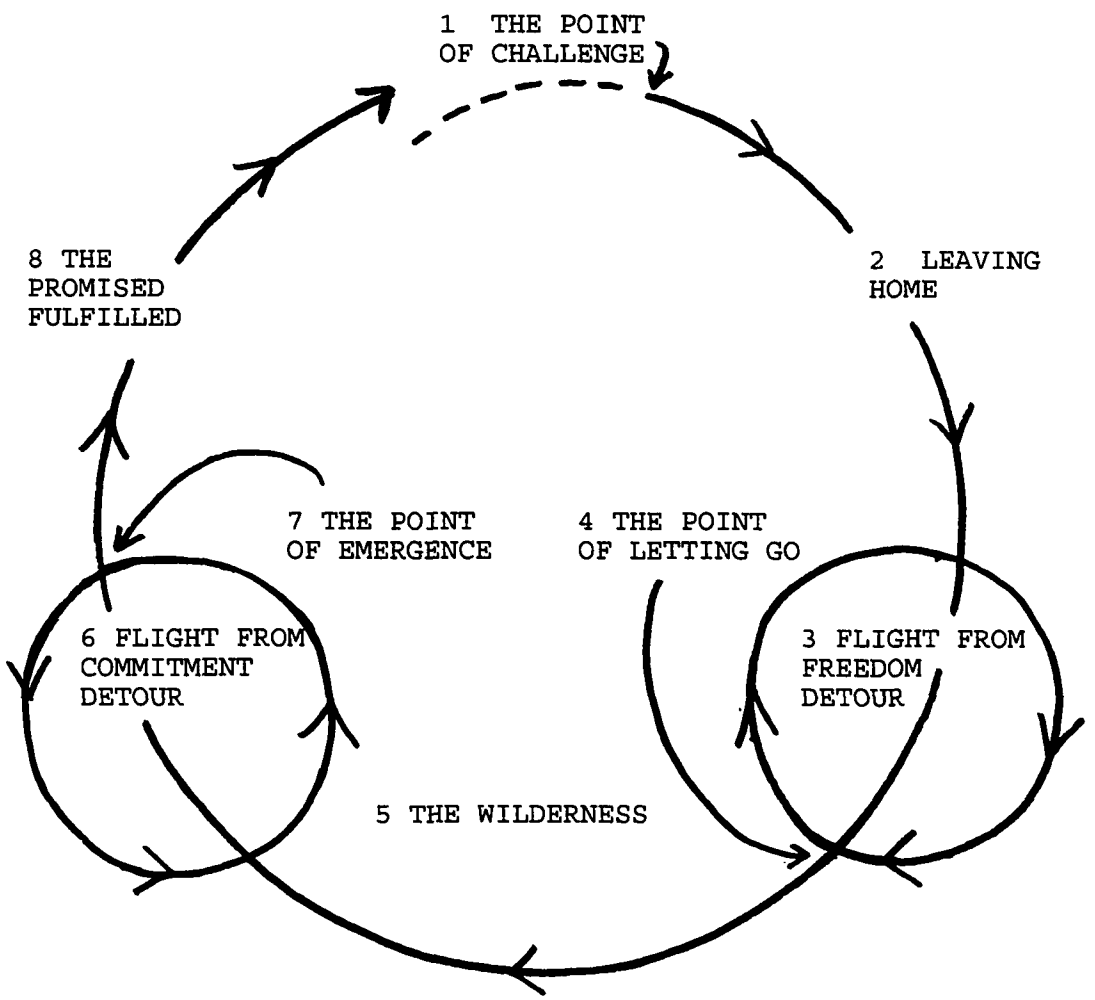
[11] ". . . the ego is exposed as unable and insufficient in the face of death to center the personality; the ego, in all its accumulated stages of competence is eventually recognized as incapable of embracing its own negation." See Loder, 154.

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always calls into question the way we interpret our world, causing us to feel disoriented, to enter into the period Loder calls "restless incoherence."

Figure 7

Phases of Life Transition
Based on the Story of the Exodus



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In individual lives, such disorientation may be initiated by a traumatic event such as a death, a birth, a marriage, an illness, a new job, a move to a new place of residence, or the severing of a relationship. In a congregation it may come about due to a change of pastor, a major economic shift in the community, or a conflict that comes to the surface of church life. On the other hand, it may occur more gradually through the prophetic witness of the teaching ministry in which Christians encounter the truth of their tradition, learn to trust more deeply, and engage in the ongoing practices of church life.

2. Leaving Home

Regardless whether perceptions held in the past become increasingly inadequate due to a specific occasion which challenges "the way things are," or due to a gradual development which creates a vague restlessness and a sense that things just don't fit together as they once did, transitions cause us to step out into a yet unknown reality. Just like the Israelites who took their dough before it was leavened and began their journey with their kneading bowls wrapped up in their cloaks, transitions cause us to leave the place we have called home, ready or not (Exod. 12:34).

At first, the trip may involve feelings of curiosity or excitement, but inevitably there will also come sensations of helplessness, loneliness, and emptiness as the familiar disintegrates and the ground on which we have stood seems to

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crumble beneath us. Believing there is nothing supporting our life, we may feel anxious, fearful of our own physical death, or worse yet, of living forever in a state of meaninglessness.[12] Our anxiety can cause us to feel cut off from God, from others, and from the heart of who we are. The situation can take on a tragic air, not only because we believe ourselves to be homeless, but because we are aware of our own inability to do that which should be done--to establish a home.

This stage can come into being as we denounce an evil that we have come to recognize in our society, speaking a resounding "No!" to oppressive power that seeks to form us in its image. It can happen as a congregation enters into a new mission project, begins to build a new building, or lets go of a tradition that is no longer life-giving to the church.

3. Flight From Freedom Detour

Anxiety can block us from moving forward through transitions. Instead, it may cause us to flee from the freedom that threatens us and to murmur, as did the Israelites, that it would be better to go back to Egypt than to endure the wilderness.[13] Mentally and emotionally, if not physically, we may actually go back, pretending that

[12] Paul Tillich. The Courage to Be (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 35.

[13] See Num. 14:3, for example.

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things are as they have always been, abstaining from any sort of questioning, suppressing doubt in ourselves, and even trying to curtail it in others.

Coping with anxiety by this kind of denial feeds on itself. Narrowness begets narrowness. The closed mind finds it harder to accept new ideas. Isolation is the result. In some cases, this isolation may be extreme as when a sect or cult withdraws from the rest of the world with the intention of avoiding any challenge to its way of life; more often, the detachment is moderate as when a person or group avoids contact with other people, events, books, or ideas that might threaten the system of meaning they have secured for themselves.[14]

Yet, often, isolation takes a more inward form. When new information comes our way, it is simply ignored or mentally filed as "unimportant."[15] Like a little child who plugs her ears and shouts, "I can't hear you," we simply refuse to be affected by data which does not conform to what we already know to be true. Then, because we not only shape meaning but it shapes us, our whole orientation can become closed over time, making us feel even more alone and

[14] Milton Rokeach et al., The Open and Closed Mind (New York: Basic Books, 1960), 284.

[15] Rather than allowing such information to shape our core beliefs, we simply file it (as a belief or a disbelief) into a peripheral system. That way the information can be contained within limited bounds and has no power to alter who we are. See Rokeach, 40.

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helpless in the world. That is to say, by isolating new information we can become isolated; our separateness, in turn, can lead to feelings of self-inadequacy and self-hate, and so the detour continues.

Over time, we can become rigid and authoritarian, holding disbeliefs strongly, compartmentalizing what we know to be true, eventually losing our ability to distinguish between threatening information and its source. Then, we can begin to accept or reject people according to their agreement or disagreement with our own narrow framework of interpretation.[16]

We may also flee from freedom through "works-righteousness." That is, we may undertake certain practices with the thought that our own actions will restore a sense of wholeness to our lives. Often, this leads to judgementalism. We forget about grace; we begin to live as though it is possible to achieve salvation.

For the Israelites, this happens while they are waiting for Moses to come down from Mount Sinai. In their impatience, they pool their jewelry, melt it down, and cast an image of a golden calf. Then they proclaim to themselves, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (Exod. 32:4)

Belief in self-salvation can cause us to lose perspective. We may be tempted by anything that is novel--

[16] Rokeach, 55-56.

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anything that will promise a "quick fix" to our problems. We may become very busy and may even be able to show results, but burnout will soon be the consequence. Spiritual disciplines, usually healthy practices that help shape us in the image of God, may take on a distorted character when they begin to be valued as means of securing ourselves. The desire to live a moral life may become legalism; prayer may become escapism; the forms of worship may become more important than the act of worship itself.

As with the suppression of doubt, the rigor of self-salvation deceives, causing narrowness, an unreasonable dependence on personal devotion, and often a literalistic view of the Bible. By numbing ourselves to anxiety, we can also numb ourselves to the joy, love, and beauty of life. By trying to detour around pain rather than moving courageously through it, we can close ourselves to the possibilities of new learning. There is a drain on our energy. Ultimately, we discover we cannot achieve any authentic meaning on our own.

4. The Point of Letting Go

Even though we are tempted to avoid anxiety by spinning around and around in our own denial or self-securing behavior, there is an Impulse to Life that urges us forward through pain and chaos. That Spirit calls us to accept God's presence even when we cannot sense it, to trust God's leading even when we do not discern it, and to believe God

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supports us even when we cannot see the ground beneath our feet.

As Pharaoh's army advanced upon the Israelites, they cried out in fear (Exod. 14:11-12). Yet, Moses quieted them, encouraging them to let go of anxiety, reminding them God would deliver them, if they would but trust (Exod. 14:13-14). So too, we are reminded that moving forward through the transition process does not require us to clutch more tightly to what has been, but to release our hold, offering ourselves over to God's purposes, even if we don't know exactly what that may mean for us in the future. It is a giving in to emptiness. Sometimes it may involve an emotional relinquishment of something that was physically left behind long ago. With that letting go may come a flood of tears, a sense of peace, or a quiet hope which allows us to move on into the next phase of our journey.

5. The Wilderness

In the story of the Exodus, the wilderness was the place where the Israelites were to learn to depend on God in new ways. The pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day beckoned them to put one foot in front of the other, still not quite sure of their final destination. Along the way, God provided water from the rock and food sufficient only for one day at a time.

When we enter the wilderness phase of the transition process, we may feel like our life has been thrown into

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neutral gear and is merely idling. Progress has stopped; nothing seems to be happening. Like the desert landscape itself, we may feel dry and barren. In this phase, God's words to us might well be the same words spoken through Isaiah.

> Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Isa. 43:18-19)

Even though we may not yet discern it, new life is germinating.

The wilderness is really a time of incubation in which there is no longer a frantic, intense focus on the nature of the conflict felt in the period of leaving Egypt. This moment is one, not of escape, but of tranquil attention in which "the soul keeps watch with no tension, calmed and active."[17] It is what James Loder refers to as "an interlude for scanning" in which we connect with the powerful currents below the surface, opening ourselves to a new sense of integration.[18]

Although such wilderness times often coincide with real transitions taking place in the life of individuals within a congregation or within the community as a whole, the church, in its wisdom, has set aside the seasons of Advent and Lent

[17] Parks, 120.

[18] Loder, 32.

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as planned periods of introspection and waiting. Special prayer and study groups that often take place during such times give Elders the opportunity to ask important questions that can help others discern the leading of the Spirit in their own lives and in the life of the church.

6. Flight From Commitment Detour

As the Israelites neared Canaan, they sent spies who came back and told them they had seen no milk or honey in the Promised Land, just giants living there who made them feel about as powerful as grasshoppers (Num. 13:32-33). Once again anxiety set in. Once again they took a detour, refusing to go forward into the future.

Even on the brink of new life, our feeling of powerlessness may cause us to search for a quick way to end the discomfort of the transition process and put us back in control. We may avoid following the lead of God's Spirit by making a decision, any decision, just so it will bring closure to our wilderness experience.

On the other hand, we may avoid moving forward simply by refusing to choose anything that might commit us to something we don't fully understand. We may want more information before we move ahead. We may become cynical, insisting on some assurance that life will be better on the other side of the Jordan. Lacking that, we may continue to sample various perspectives, never allowing ourselves

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actually to become participants in the process of claiming the new land as our own.

When we are trapped in the cycle of avoidance by choosing too easily or by not choosing at all, we may begin, indefinitely and arbitrarily to put objects, persons, and things at the center of our life instead of God. Then, because we feel no essential relatedness to them, no one choice seems to be preferable to any other choice. Freedom becomes just a nice idea; "no commitment to a cause or a person is meaningful."[19] No one authority takes precedent; everything becomes relative.

Sharon Parks notes that most of us move through such unqualified relativism as a part of the natural maturing process as we grow from teen years to adulthood;[20] but some of us live perpetually in this young-adult stage, refusing to enter into a authentic new beginning. Sometimes we refuse our freedom by continually claiming victim status, pointing to incidents in the past which will always hold us captive. Other times, we avoid growing into a new reality by becoming perpetually occupied with work or other activity. Even church work can serve to clutter our lives if it creates separation rather than integration and wholeness. Still, other times, we distract ourselves with

[19] Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 63.

[20] Parks, 48-53.

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amusement devices; television, video, electronic games and any number of other attention-grabbing gadgets are always readily available. Worship services may be planned primarily with an eye to their entertainment value, to their ability to attract new members. Eventually, our unwillingness to commit may result in a trivialized faith steeped in sentimentality but with very little capacity to connect us authentically with God as the Source of our Power.

7. The Point of Emergence

As long as we try to avoid fully trusting God, we will be sidetracked; but when we once again let go of our own anxiety, we may discover a moment of startling insight which can arrive with convictional force and transformational power. It is an insight that comes, not as a result of a "sequential movement from proposition to proposition" in which the problem has been formulated rationally, hypotheses have been tested, and then a solution has finally been selected; it is a deep knowing which occurs because we have made ourselves vulnerable; we have entered into a reality which is beyond our own imaginative reasoning.[21]

It's not just that we take in new information, or synthesize conflicting ideas or even that we learn something different about God; it is that we participate, if only for a moment, in the very being of that God who grounds us and

[21] Loder, 33.

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renews us and frees us for love and service. It is a moment of "ah-ha!," an Epiphany, an Easter, a Pentecost, in which energy that has been bound up in the transition process is released and we are opened to our emerging self, the new creation which we are becoming.[22]

In this stage, the church is freed from its own self-destructive participation in oppression. It is empowered to become a channel of God's grace. There is a sense of renewed bonding with the Creator and with all of Creation. It feels good just to be sitting next to each other in the community of the church worshipping on Sunday morning.

The realization of our interconnectedness fosters trust and a sense of security which allows us to translate our caring into action. As we exercise our freedom, even in limited ways, we can begin to experience some degree of new life. That experience, in turn, can embolden us to risk further. For this reason, engaging in service and justice-making must be part of any teaching ministry that encourages us to stretch toward a more integrated faith perspective.

8. The Promised Fulfilled

In the Exodus story, God holds fast to the promise made to the Israelites, giving them a land for which they had not labored, and towns that they had not built and vineyards that they had not planted (Josh. 24:13). In return, God requested their singular loyalty. Joshua asked the people

[22] Loder, 38-39.

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to make a vow, pledging their commitment to the God who had brought them into freedom. Then he set up a stone to serve as a witness to their oath (Josh. 24:27).

When we can trust the God who holds us eternally, when we can accept our freedom without giving in to the self-securing behaviors of either rigid absolutism or uncommitted relativism, we often discover we have been given a new home. With the release of tension, there is a "feeling of enlargement, a new quality of openness to self and world."[23] Life appears fresh; wholeness returns. We are amazed that the struggle which has occupied us for such a long time has been resolved in such a surprising way. We feel relieved. Polarization becomes paradox as we discover we can hold together two ideas which seemed to be in opposition to each other at an earlier time. Together we celebrate and give glory to God.

Loder tells us that, as we stand in this new-found land, it is only natural that we share what has happened to us, to see how our new learning actually works in the world, to practice living as the new person, the new community we have become.[24] In this moment, a profound sense of gratitude may well up, moving us by the plight of others, quickening us to action. Because we have been given new

[23] Parks, 126.

[24] Loder (p.4) refers to this stage as the moment of "interpretation and verification."

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life, it is likely we will want to spread that life to others; because our brokenness has been reconciled, it is likely we will want to participate in God's ministry of reconciliation. Instead of a place of rest, we discover the Promised Land is a place of outreach in which our own transformation calls us into the "transformation of all things."[25]

Phases of Life Transition: The Story of the Christ

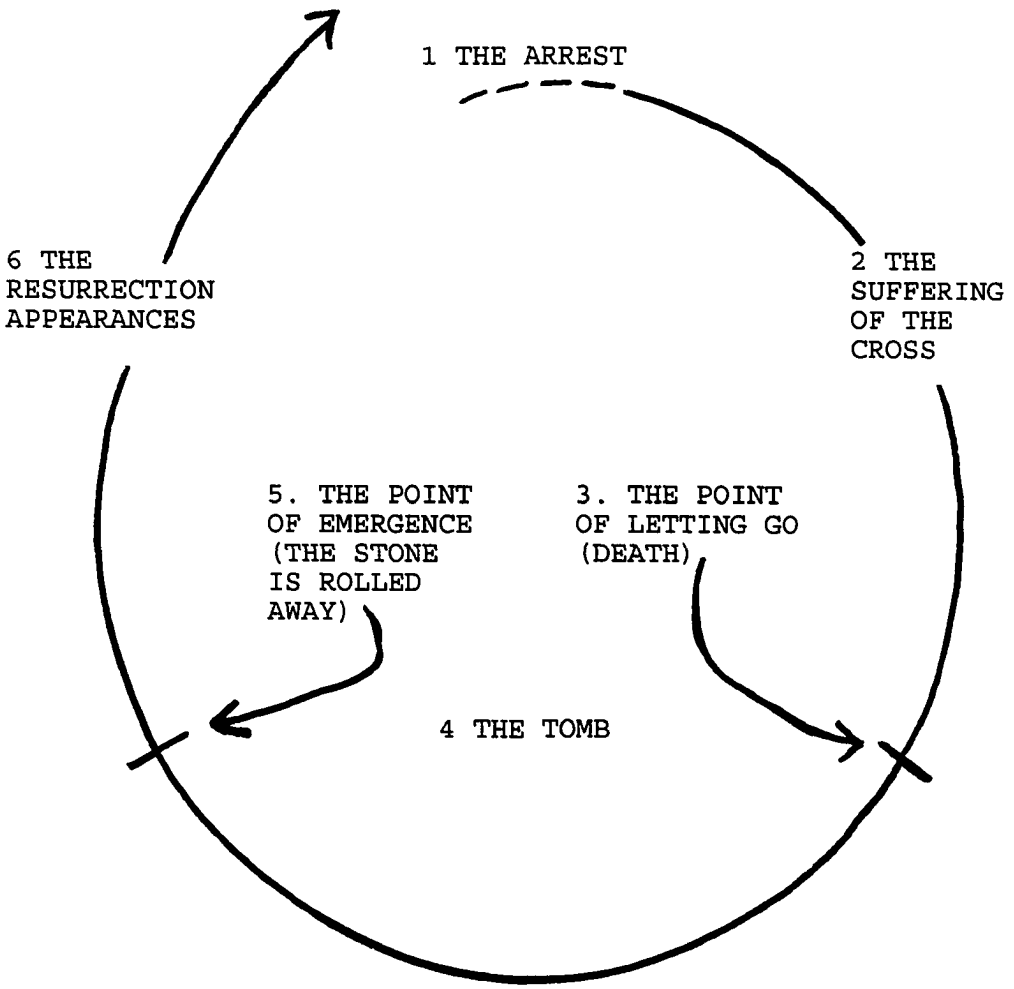
Although the Exodus story has served as an example of the transition model in this discussion, the truth of the cycle can also be seen in the distinctive story of Christ's suffering, death, entombment, and resurrection in the New Testament. Figure 8 offers a graphic representation of how the transition process might be understood through those symbols. In this figure, however, the detours are missing since the story tells us that Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross" (Phil.2:8).

[25] Loder, 154.

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Figure 8

Phases of Life Transition
Based on the Story of Christ



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By his example we learn that the route to new life is *through* transition, not around it. Elders who want to expand their own capacity for faith, or who want to help others mature in discipleship find that their task involves moving forward and encouraging others to do the same, rather than giving in to the temptations of self-securing detours along the way.

That is not to say the speed of the process can be forced. Transitions do not function by chronological time, but by *kairos*, in which the past and the future are brought together in the providence of God's time. The task of the Eldership is not to control movement from one moment of the transition process to the next--indeed, control is not possible. Instead, its role is to encourage others to view transitions as learning points, as times of growth which they need not fear.

As Elders meet with friends over coffee, pray with patients in hospital rooms, take communion to the homebound, and tend to the needs of those on their shepherding list, they will come to see that transitions do not just take place in mid-life; they happen over and over, at all stages of development, as God's Spirit seeks to teach us, creating us ever anew. Although we might like to think that transitions only serve to interrupt the stability that constitutes what is normal, the opposite is actually true--

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we spend more time in transition than we do in equilibrium.[26] Transition is our way of life.

As spiritual leaders, Elders have an opportunity to create a climate within a congregation where transitions can be viewed as potential learning points rather than threats. At every phase of transition, it is helpful to be able to share feelings and experiences with someone else. Such sharing can be healing when it is received in a non-judgmental atmosphere. By listening carefully to how people describe what is happening to them, Elders can discern what kind of teaching is needed at each phase of the transition cycle. If frustration is too great, we cannot learn; if challenge is not sufficient, we do not learn. During high anxiety, the Elders are called to offer comfort, helping those in their care to become attuned to the Spirit of Love which casts out all fear (1 John 4:18); during low anxiety, the Elders are called to offer challenge in order to motivate growth.

Along the way, it will be important for the Eldership to acknowledge its own limitations, remembering that Elders are part of a team with the pastor or pastors of the congregation. That team sometimes will find it necessary to refer a person to a professional therapist when intensive long-term help is needed.

[26] Loder, 131.

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Here are some strategies which may be useful to the Eldership as it seeks to create a climate in which transition is valued and embraced, and to help individuals, perhaps even the congregation itself, to move through each stage of the cycle in order to learn and grow.

Teaching in the Phases of Life Transition

1. Teaching at the Point of Challenge

Although the Point of Challenge often emerges through an unanticipated event in one's personal life, it can also appear when a bit of new information which requires a response is intentionally introduced. By suggesting a different procedure for getting things done, by raising ethical questions posed by new technologies, by making sure multiple viewpoints are heard when an issue is being discussed in a congregation, Elders can actually help foster dissonance which, then, can become an opportunity for growth.

2. Teaching in the Phase of Leaving Home

When disorientation occurs, anxiety rises. Then, what is needed is a place to vent feelings, to say whatever is on one's mind in a place of acceptance. Expressing out loud the reality of personal suffering can be the first step in alleviating such pain. Elders can help create a safe place where that can happen by offering a listening ear themselves or by putting people in touch with others with whom they can share freely what is happening in their own lives. In some

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congregations, special groups are formed when the pastoral leadership or the Eldership discovers several people are in transition due to similar circumstances such as a change of job, a divorce, or a recent death of a spouse.

3. Teaching in the Flight from Freedom Detour

Just as people who experience the death of loved ones must grieve their loss in order to get on with their lives, so it is with transitions--grieving what has been lost in leaving home is necessary in order to move forward through the process. Elders who can help people name what they are leaving behind will facilitate progress. Some congregations, recognizing it is time to let go of a relationship or a program, will make it a point to commemorate and celebrate the meaning it has held in the past before striking out in a new direction.

4. Teaching at the Point of Letting Go

The Eldership can affirm acts of trust that take place within the lives of individuals and within the church itself. Giving up self-securing behaviors is something to celebrate. Some congregations choose to ritualize times of letting go with prayer, consecrating the workers of a new mission project, gathering the community to break ground for a new building, calling upon the leading of the Holy Spirit before the formation of the congregation's long-range plan.

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5. Teaching in the Phase of the Wilderness

In the wilderness phase, things can seem vague and lifeless; direction and clarity are needed. Elders can help those in this phase to focus by reminding them of the truth that is to be found in their tradition, the strength that can come from deepening their relationship with God, and the guidance that can come from the regular practice of the spiritual disciplines. They can ask questions such as: What is going on? How do you feel about what is going on? What are you learning about yourself in all this? What are you learning about God? How do you believe you are being called to grow and change? What do you believe God is calling you to do next? Then, serving as a "sounding board," they can help those in the wilderness phase explore new possibilities, identifying possible small steps that can be taken in the situation. In doing so, however, Elders must be careful not to hurry in with words of advice or of cheer which can trivialize and or encourage other detours.

6. Teaching in the Flight from Commitment Detour

Joanna Rogers Macy suggests that, in order to come to a fullness of life, human beings must be able to acknowledge their fear of the future; only then can they move into it with confidence.[27] Elders can help those who have gotten tangled up in the Flight From Commitment Detour by

[27] Joanna Rogers Macy, Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1983), 18.

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encouraging them to name their fears, thereby taking the first step in their elimination. Then, they can gently urge those who are still stuck to set priorities, removing the clutter from their lives which may be keeping them entertained and busy but also may be keeping them from moving forward in their spiritual journey.

7. Teaching at the Point of Emergence

Loder describes this phase as a period of release and repatterning in which new energy is made available for creative action. People in this phase need opportunities to try out their new insights. Elders can help by recognizing that people do, indeed, change and grow, setting aside old expectations and honoring the new creation that has emerged. It is particularly important to give young adults this kind of freedom; those who have grown up in the congregation especially will appreciate Elders who respect their maturity, treating them as adults rather than children, seeking out their opinions and calling them into positions of leadership.

8. Teaching in the Phase of the Promised Land

With this phase, equilibrium is restored; wholeness can be celebrated. Yet, as time goes on, Elders may discover they have another responsibility in this phase: to serve as a catalyst in getting the transition process started again. As Elders raise questions about what is going on in contemporary life in light of the Gospel's call for freedom,

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love, and justice, as they teach at the table or in a small group study, as they contribute comments in committees or at a board meeting, as they model personal commitment to follow the leading of God's Spirit, they well may offer a challenge, a prophetic witness which starts the cycle all over again. Such is one of the tasks of a good teacher.

We do not need to stretch our minds much to see that the church as a whole institution in today's world is in the midst of transition. Some parts of that church are avoiding the whole affair by holding rigidly to the past, creating their own mono-cultural congregations in which the changes in the surrounding world cannot affect them. Other parts of that church live as if it were not possible to make any claim for truth at all in these days of plurality. Yet, the gospel calls us to set aside fear, to live boldly trusting the leading of God's Spirit, to allow ourselves to be transformed and renewed and converted again and again to the truth of God's grace and freedom.

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A PARABLE

When Wally was a boy, he told the whole neighborhood that his father was stronger than anyone else in the world. He'd go stand in the front yard and holler at the top of his voice, "My daddy's arms are as strong as a truck."

In those days, a cherry tree grew in Wally's backyard. It was his hiding place. Ten feet above the ground there was a limb that made sort of a cradle for him. There he could lie, face down, reading, thinking, and being alone. Even his parents didn't know where he was when he went to the tree to hide. Sometimes they'd call him, "Wally, Wally," but they couldn't see him in the leaves. It felt very tricky.

Then came the thunderstorm. If the sky grew dark that day or gave any warning, Wally didn't see it. Just all of a sudden the wind tore through the backyard and struck the cherry tree with such force that it ripped the book right out of Wally's hand. It nearly threw him from the limb. But he locked his arms around it and hung on.

"Daddy!"

The sky grew absolutely black and the thunder crashed. The whole tree bowed down and rose again. The wind blew his shirt up to his shoulder. The rain hit like bullets. He thought his arms were going to slip.

"Daddeee!"

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And then he saw that familiar face at the back door, peering out into the storm.

"Out here! Up here! Daddy, come and get me!"

And his daddy did see and he came right away. Wally was so relieved. He just took it for granted that his Daddy would climb right up in the tree and get him. But that wasn't the plan at all. His father came to a spot right below Wally, lifted up his arms and shouted, "Jump."

"What?"

"Jump. I'll catch you."

He had a crazy man for a father. Wally looked and there he stood, six or seven miles beneath him, holding up two skinny little arms. If he jumped, he's miss. He'd hit the ground and die.

"No!" he screamed. He'd stay right there until the storm was over. He closed his eyes and hung on. But the wind and the rain slapped that cherry tree, bent it back, and cracked the limb at the trunk. So Wally jumped. No, he let go. He surrendered. Well, actually, he fell.

But his father did catch him and squeezed him tight. Wally wrapped his arms and legs around him and felt the scratch of his whiskers on his own face and he began to tremble and cry.

"Oh, my daddy! His arms are as strong as a truck."

(Taken from Walter Wangerin, Mourning Into Dancing (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1992). Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing.)

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In listening to and caring for others, the Eldership will run across individuals, and sometimes whole congregations who are up a tree, out on a limb in the midst of one of life's storms, holding on for dear life, being called to make a leap of faith when such a move seems foolhardy. The teaching task in the midst of this caring ministry is to encourage trust, to be a non-anxious presence who says through both word and example, "It will be all right. Jump!"

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CHAPTER 4

Teaching in the Classroom

Lord, I want to be a Christian
In my heart
In my heart
Lord, I want to be a Christian
In my heart.

Traditional Spiritual

In 1978, researcher Philip Hallie traveled to the Protestant village of *Le Chambon* in Southern France. It was there, during the occupation of Nazi Germany, that Christians living in the town had taken hundreds of Jewish refugees from all over Europe into their homes, hiding them until new identification could be forged for their escape. Hallie wanted to know why. Why had these people risked their lives and the lives of their families in a time when inhumanity and political insanity seemed to grip most of the rest of the world?

Hallie spent weeks in the village, interviewing its inhabitants, trying to determine what had caused them to resist evil and act for good in such a dangerous time. Everywhere he went, he got the same sort of answer.

> Who else could help them? Things had to be done, that's all, and we happened to be there to do them. You must understand that it was the most natural thing in the world to help these people.[1]

[1] Philip Hallie, Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 21.

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Indeed, it seemed to be the natural thing for the citizens of *Le Chambon;* to take such action was an integral part of who they were as followers of Jesus Christ. Hallie writes,

> If we would understand the goodness that happened in *Le Chambon*, we must see how easy it was for them to refuse to give up their consciences, to refuse to participate in hatred, betrayal and murder, and to help the desperate adults and the terrified children who knocked on their doors. . . . We must see this, and we must also see the many elements that came together to make these things happen. Goodness is the simplest thing in the world. And the most complex, like opening a door.[2]

What ingredients went into building the *Le Chambon* spirit? It certainly had not always been part of the people's lives. When Pastor Trocme first arrived in 1934, he described the village as one moving toward "death, death, death."[3] He was sure he had been called in to preside over the funeral of the church there. During the first three months, visiting in the homes of those in the congregation, the same maxim was used over and over to describe what he could expect as a new resident: "Nine months of winter, three months of trouble.[4]" Life in *Le Chambon* was pretty grim.

But Pastor Trocme took up the task of ministry, preaching on the themes he saw depicted in the teachings of

[2] Hallie, 284.

[3] Hallie, 78.

[4] Hallie, 78.

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Jesus: all human life is precious; doing no harm is the first step to eliminating evil; to be against evil is to be against the destruction of human life.

> The sermons did not propose a neat blueprint for fighting hatred with love. They were not attempts to tell the world or *Le Chambon* exactly how to overcome Hitler's evil with love. The sermons said: Work and look hard for ways, for opportunities to make little moves against destructiveness. The sermons did not tell what those moves should be; they said only that an imitator of Christ must somehow make such moves when the occasion arises.[5]

Pastor Trocme modeled such moves by refusing to serve in the military, by making optional the required stiff-armed salute of the Fascists to the flag in the church-run school, and by harboring Jewish refugees himself in the parsonage.

However, Pastor Trocme did not assume that members of the congregation would know who they were to become and what they were to do in the world just by watching his example, or by attending church, or even by listening to inspiring sermons. He knew, as much as Christian character can be shaped by participating in a community of faith, no congregation ever wholly embodies the gospel, so it is far from inevitable that socializing people, helping them "fit in" to the church as it is, will "sponsor them toward Christian faith lived with human freedom in response to the

[5] Hallie, 85.

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Realm of God."[6] So, eventually, he established thirteen Bible study groups of youth in the parish.

These groups were led by individuals called *responsables* who served the parish much like Elders do in our the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It was they who became the communication network, "the backbone of the parish as far as sheltering and hiding refugees was concerned."[7]

> During the Occupation Trocme gave most of his instruction. . . to these leaders as they sat in his somber office in the presbytery. . . . In those meetings they all discovered what the Good Samaritan passage meant (who the neighbor was whom we were being told to love and to help) and they discovered the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount--not in terms of some abstract, pious theory, or even in terms of a long-term plan, but in terms of day-to-day decisions appropriate to the circumstances of *Le Chambon*.[8]

Over time, these leaders came to value the time they spent together learning from their pastor. His professional training had given him knowledge and skills which they were grateful he could share with them.

The community the *responsables* built with each other became a source of strength and courage as they met together over time. In the sessions set apart from the rest of the congregation, they were able to get a perspective on what

[6] Groome, Christian Religious Education, 125.

[7] Hallie, 173.

[8] Hallie, 17, 173.

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was happening in the church, in their town, and in the world. More and more, practical plans for overcoming evil with good (Rom. 12:21) came out of these meetings where the *responsables* began to understand the Realm of God, not as a place, but as a way of being in the world.

Strategies for action were shaped as the *responsables* allowed the Scriptures to shed light on their own individual lives and then to illumine places where the Spirit of God was at work in the world so they could participate in that work as well.

> Every two weeks, they all discussed a passage they had been thinking about for those two weeks. Trocme did not lay down an interpretation and ask them to carry it away with them; he helped stimulate their own interpretations and let them flower.[9]

As a group, the *responsables* were able to develop their own skills for studying the Bible, for leading a small group, and for asking the kinds of questions that could help others think critically. In their leadership group, they felt safe enough to try out such skills on each other, offering suggestions to each other for the sake of improving in their abilities.

Eventually, the *responsables* were able to use the skills they had practiced to lead groups of lay people, going to thirteen different parts of the parish where each

[9] Hallie, 172-73.

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> tried to do with the people in his area what Trocme had tried to do with them: stimulate a *valuable* understanding of the chosen passage. . . . The local discussion groups doubled in size after a short time and attracted younger and younger people. . . . Above all, the ideas that came from each of these groups were, to use Trocme's words "fervent, practical, and concrete."[10]

These Bible studies became the means by which Christian character took shape in *Le Chambon;* but it was the particular style of study that made the classes relevant to their own life situation. Members of the community did not come together only to ask, "What does the Bible say?" but also to discover what God was using the Bible to do in them.

Through the Biblical texts, they began to see God, not just as a Force in history, but as an active Presence holding all things together. They began to understand God's covenant, not just as something that was established with Abraham, or Moses, or Jacob, but a promise that was being made through the Bible by God to them. They began to comprehend the meaning of political events, not just in the ancient Middle East, but in their own place and time. For them, the Bible offered not just a model of the perfect existence, but a way of approaching life as a pilgrimage with inherent dangers, limitations, and treasures.[11]

[10] Hallie, 172-73.

[11] These four functions of the Bible in the life of a community were identified by Dykstra in "Education in Christian Practice."

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> They found out through Scripture what kind of world they really lived in, and this made it possible to tell lies from truth and to find courage to do what, had their minds been "conformed to this world," they could not have done.[12]

Meeting with other Christians in a small group setting on a regular basis, the people of *Le Chambon* learned to place their story in dialogue with the Christian Story in order to "put their life where their mouth was," to live out their commitment to following Jesus Christ in specific ways.[13]

The story of *Le Chambon* suggests that teaching in the classroom or in a small group setting is an activity of religious imagination by which learners claim the power that is theirs, not just to participate in the world as it seems to be, but to participate in the Divine Spirit as it shapes and reshapes the world into its true nature as the Realm of God.[14] Parker Palmer writes that such imagination "implicates us in the web of life," resisting isolation and selfishness, calling us to "involvement, mutuality, and accountability."[15] These three concepts can serve to guide the Eldership as it offers insight for the educational ministry of the congregation or as it teaches directly in the classroom or small group setting.

[12] Dykstra, "Education in Christian Practice."

[13] Palmer, 45.

[14] Harris, Teaching and Religious Imagination, 88.

[15] Palmer, 9.

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Involvement

It is a general principle of education that, in order to learn any subject matter, students must *do* something with it. Teaching is not telling; students are not receptacles to be filled. If they do not engage the material of the lesson, either in some kind of outward expression or in some internal dialogue, they will never make it their own. It is activity and not lecture which involves students in the learning process. However, activity should not be equated with crafts. Activity serves as a medium by which a concept can be more thoroughly understood; a craft project serves as a medium for engaging idle hands. The list in Figure 9 certainly is not exhaustive, but it offers suggestions about specific forms learning activities can take.

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Figure 9

Active Ways to Involve Students in Learning
(Or "What to Do Instead of Lecturing")

Evaluate a case study.

Take part in a role-play.

Find commonalities among terms.

Draw meaning from personal experience.

Work with clay.

Draw meaning from a narrative.

Paint a picture.

Look at a picture someone else has painted.

Reflect on a completed service project.

Make a sculpture.

Share a personal story with someone else.

Make a journal entry.

Memorize a Bible verse or passage.

Write a prayer.

Write a hymn.

Participate in a choral reading.

Make a banner.

Write a poem.

Write a story.

Conduct a mock court.

Have a debate.

Make a video.

Take a field trip.

Create a dance.

Research a topic.

Do a word search.

Do a dance.

Make a model.

Plan a worship service.

Discuss a film or video.

Make a list.

Write the ending to a story.

Answer a question.

Write a play.

Observe an object for an extended period of time.

Play a game.

Participate in a simulation.

Paraphrase a Bible passage.

Draw a diagram.

Make a map.

Make a computer game.

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It is the task of the teacher to begin each lesson at the level of the students' interests and abilities and then to help them grow beyond those interests and abilities, creating an enlarged capacity for wonder. Such expansion is fostered by creating each unit or set of lessons, not around a topic, but around a question: a question that is so large, the teacher and the students never can fully answer it; they can only dwell together in its presence.[16] In The Color Purple, Alice Walker captures the heart of this kind of teaching which recognizes mystery is always part of the dynamic.

> I think us here to wonder. . . to ast. And that in wondering 'bout the big things and asting bout the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident. But you never know nothing more about the big things than you start out with.[17]

Such questions rise, not out of the teacher's need to "cover" a certain amount of material, but out of the lives of the people who are gathered to learn. In *Le Chambon*, for example, the questions structuring their discussions over time might have included: What is the nature of hospitality? To what extent does God expect us to jeopardize those in our family for the sake of the stranger? What does it mean to be community? How does God expect us to treat our enemies?

[16] Harris, Teaching and Religious Imagination, 73.

[17] Alice Walker, The Color Purple (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), 247.

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Such questions provide a way to make relevant Christian tradition, particularly the Scriptures, to the situation in which learners are called to be church together.

Sometimes, the students themselves will come through the door of the classroom with such questions burning in their own hearts; but most often, it will be the task of the teacher to pose them, to awaken thought, to help the students focus on the tension between their lived lives and the call of the Gospel, to arouse the student's capacity to make a choice.

The teacher engages the students as soon as they enter the door of the classroom, not by direct appeal to the will, but by involving them immediately in an activity that focuses energy, that brings the group together, and that excites them to hope. The introduction of metaphor in this initial engagement may be particularly effective for opening up students to their own creativity and for understanding concepts more deeply later in the lesson.

> Most simply, a metaphor is seeing one thing as something else. . . . Thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events, or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better-known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known.[18]

Poets often use metaphors to help them talk about big ideas such as love, fear, joy, death, and so on. Jesus used

[18] Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 15.

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metaphor every time he began a parable with the phrase "The Kingdom of God is like. . . ." From the time we are infants, metaphor is the basic way we come to know our world.

> Just as young children learn the meaning of the color red by finding the thread of similarity through many dissimilar objects (red ball, red apple, red cheeks), so we constantly ask when we do not know how to think about something, "What is it like?"[19]

Making such associations, understanding how things are connected to each other is the elemental way we learn. The use of metaphor in an initial focus activity may be as easy as asking students to "List the ways a _____ is like a _____," or "Select a photograph from those displayed that best shows the meaning of _____ for you," or "Tell us a story from your own life that illustrates what it means to _____,"

Setting two ideas side by side in such manner creates surprise. In fact, it is the nature of metaphors to shake us out of conventionality because they draw a relationship between two ideas that not only are alike in some way, but also are dissimilar. The tension between them helps us to broaden our categories and deepen our concepts.

Once the focus activity is complete, the teacher will want to help the students explore the big question that structures the unit more deeply. Moving through the body of

[19] McFague, 15.

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the lesson, the teacher will want to involve the students by asking more specific questions. These are called "enabling questions" in contrast to what Brian Wren calls "Guess-what-I'm-thinking' questions."[20] They move through a sequence from the simple to the complex. (See Figure 10.)

It is common for teachers to fall into the trap of asking only the first three kinds of enabling questions in any given lesson; yet those questions of a higher level do more to encourage involvement and ownership of the learning. It is also common for teachers to assume that children below the age of eleven or twelve cannot handle questions of any deep significance since they think concretely instead of abstractly. Such is not the case; concrete thinkers can work with the higher level questions as easily as abstract thinkers.[21] All six varieties of enabling questions can and should be asked at every age.

[20] Harris, Teaching and Religious Imagination, 106.

[21] See Jean Piaget, Six Psychological Studies (New York: Random House, 1967) xxii and 3-8 for a discussion of the Concrete Operations Stage (usually 7-11 years) and the Formal Operations Stage (usually 12-15 years.)

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Figure 10

Chart of Enabling Questions[22]

1. Observation Questions, such as "What is happening?" are important for establishing common ground for group discussion and problem solving.

2. Reflection Questions, such as "How do you feel about what is happening?" are important for helping students identify emotions and deepen understanding.

3. Association Questions, such as "Is there any connection between what X says and what Y says?" are important for discovering relationships and examples of an idea or principle.

4. Interpretation Questions, such as "What are the causes, especially the root or systemic causes?" are important for analyzing what is going on.

5. Synthesis Questions, such as "What difference does it make?" are important for determining value and summarizing what has been learned.

6. Decision Questions, such as "What should we do now?" are important for identifying possible action and motivating students to use new learning.

[22] The preceding sample questions are built on the work of Benjamin Bloom regarding the functions of the cognitive domain: recognition, recall, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. See Benjamin Bloom, Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook 1 (New York: David McKay, 1958.)

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Mutuality

As students encounter the big question asked by the lesson through active learning techniques, as they enter into that question through metaphor, as they deepen their understanding through critical thinking, power in the classroom is shared; mutuality is created: students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject.[23] Such mutuality never does violence to another; in mutuality, teachers and students never use one another. Instead, they enter into dialogue, both with the subject matter and with each other, in order to discover a truth that none of them can know by themselves.

A classroom of mutuality is where hospitality is practiced. "Hospitality means receiving each other, our struggles, our newborn ideas, with openness and care."[24] From the time they walk in the room, students should feel welcomed. Chairs arranged in a circle invite interaction. Attention given to the comfort of the space, to the lighting, the seating, the temperature of the room can go a long way toward creating a safe place where risky ideas can be explored more readily.

In a hospitable classroom, time and care are taken to get to know each person as an individual, both so the teacher can better understand the questions the students

[23] Palmer, xvi.

[24] Palmer, 74.

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bring to the learning from their lives, and so all students will sense their own worth as human beings with something to contribute to the community. Even when one person is designated as the teacher, in such a classroom, leadership is often shared with students conducting discussions or preparing information to bring to the group.

The sharing of personal stories can help establish trust within the classroom. However, students should not be asked to disclose too much too fast about themselves. Low-threat questions are most appropriate for the initial getting-to-know-you phase; later, higher risk questions can be used as confidence in the group builds. Such confidence will be established when the unique story of each individual is honored and when emotions, as well as intellect, are accepted as part of the community interchange.

As a class is first getting started, another way hospitality can be offered is by establishing classroom guidelines. When students know what to expect from the teacher and the other learners, when they know what is expected of them, they will feel more secure. It is best if such expectations can be agreed upon by the group together. For example, a class may want to establish a rule of confidentiality so that whatever is said in the context of the group is not shared with others; or, they may want to decide together that judgementalism will have no part of their discussion.

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When mutuality is present, a non-threatening atmosphere is fostered in which ideas can be explored freely; everyone in the classroom knows it is all right to make mistakes. Such permission to be wrong is critical to learning. English educator John Hull observes:

> When the danger of being wrong is great, the system will close up. The authority for the alternative point of view will be contested, the information presented will be filtered out so as to disregard the potentially threatening material, and other tactics of denial, avoidance, and distortion will be employed in order to protect the system.[25]

In other words, when students are worried about failing in the eyes of the teacher or in the eyes of the other students, they cannot change and grow; conversion is impeded.

On the other hand, when open dialogue can take place without fear of embarrassment, growth is nurtured. Talking together counters isolationism that can breed close-mindedness. Encountering other perspectives beyond our own can stir interior conversation between our own beliefs and disbeliefs. Through such internal dialogue, we can clarify and develop our own Christian character, allowing ourselves to be formed and reformed by our learning.

That is to say, we must not only be willing to make our classrooms hospitable places where the stranger or beginner

[25] John Hull, What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning? (London: SCM Press, 1985), 110.

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can be welcomed, we must be willing to make our minds hospitable places where ideas that are outside our own perspective can be heard. We are so easily blinded by our way of seeing the world that is shaped by our social status, our education, our ethnic identification, our race, our gender, our life experience, we need those other perspectives to open our eyes to realities that we have denied, to open our ears to voices who wish to name their own realities, and to open our hearts to receive others and to enter into partnership with them in the struggle for freedom.[26]

Real learning, the kind that helps us recognize our own idolatries and to acknowledge our own self-securing ways, is difficult to realize in a group of like-minded people who all have a similar level of education, color of skin, or income level, who are the same age and who like to do the same kinds of things. That is to say, it is important to be in contact with those who are different from ourselves if there is to be a chance that we will understand the gospel in fresh ways for our time and place.

The implication of all this is that diversity in the church is not a frill. We need diversity in order to keep ourselves from becoming closed-minded and rigid, unapproachable to God's Spirit who seeks to move us and mold

[26] Mary Elizabeth Moore, Teaching From the Heart (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 163.

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us in new ways. If we are to be continually converted ourselves, we must be willing to listen

> to one another and to the physical world--its groans and needs--and to those excluded from social participation for any reason, including reasons other than economic oppression. These persons may be children, women, the aged, gay and lesbian people, or individuals with disabilities. Encountering the world also includes listening to those people who are more oppressor than oppressed, for even their voices are heard very little at a deep level. Even their oppressive acts come in part from their own internal cries and prejudices that lead them to meet their own needs by using others.[27]

Given the fact that many Disciple congregations do not reflect the plurality of the larger society, teachers may find it necessary to augment the viewpoints represented in the classroom by intentionally bringing in other points-of-view from the wider global community. Multicultural resources can provide important perspectives that might be missing otherwise from the conversation. Media and literature can help students encounter the world when the obvious means of interaction among a diversity of people may not yet be possible.

Accountability

In the face of a world of cynicism, the church makes a bold claim--as human beings we are both determined by our circumstances and free. Even though we cannot escape being

[27] Moore, Teaching From the Heart, 183.

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shaped by the sin of the world, Christ can liberate us from its debilitating effects. Living in Christ we need no longer be bound to follow patterns of the past, nor must we "allow the feelings that we have about the past, whether negative or positive to shape our present action."[28] Our journey

> influences and supports the present practices, and the present practices provide the interpretive lens through which the past is seen and described. Education can free people to critique, reject or revise the heritage so that its relation to the present can be seen both as determined and free.[29]

That is to say, we are free to be accountable to ourselves, to each other and to God for the way we live out our Christianity.

That means, learning in the church always has to do with decision-making, with how we open our hearts to others, how we spend our time and how we spend our money. It involves the practice of the faith. But where should such "practice" take place? In most educational situations,

> practice goes on in the world, and the classroom is a place set apart. Practice is what students are being prepared for--it is oriented toward the future. Their preparation consists of absorbing accumulated knowledge--it is oriented to the past. So the realities that concern conventional education are "out there" in the world, "back there"

[28] Moore, Teaching From the Heart, 175.

[29] Moore, Teaching From the Heart, 175.

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> in the past and "up there" in the future.[30]

Yet the classroom community itself can be the place where practice starts in the present, where teachers and students begin to live the Realm of God in their relationships and procedures, process, and content. The classroom itself can be viewed as a microcosm of the world, acknowledging

> what happens in the classroom *is* happening in the world; the way we relate to each other and our subject reflects and shapes the way we conduct our relationships in the world.[31]

Using the Realm of God as criterion, students and teachers together can learn how to love neighbor by learning to love each other.

Yet accountability does not only have to do with how loving are our relationships; it also has to do with how just is our organization, our procedure. Such structure is inherent to any learning community: lessons have form. Primarily, it is the teacher

> who embodies--gives flesh to--form. But form is not an arbitrary organizational element. Every artist knows that form is not only the *intention* of content; it is the actual embodiment of content. Form is based on a theme. It is a marshaling of materials in relation to one another. It is a setting of boundaries and limits. It is a

[30] Palmer, 88.

[31] Palmer, 88.

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> discipline, an ordering, and a shaping according to need.[32]

Teachers would be wise to consider the kind of power they hold in taking the responsibility for planning what a class will study together. It is not a question of whether or not they hold such power, the power is inherent in their role; the question becomes how will they use that power justly to also enable the power that lies in the hearts of their students to be exercised. Will they throw a bucket of cold water on what the students bring to the learning process, or will they kindle that flame, encouraging participation?

Planning should be taken very seriously by those who teach and those who administer education programs. Teachers should spend several hours every few months in order to design an overall unit plan containing several lessons, all focusing on one large question. Then, as a rule-of-thumb, on a regular basis they should also spend two hours of planning for each hour in class. Figure 11 provides a format that can be used for such lesson design.

[32] Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content (New York: Vintage, 1957), 81, in Harris, Teaching and Religious Imagination, 42.

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Figure 11

Lesson Planning Chart

The "Big Question" of the Unit:_____

Enabling Questions to Ask during the Lesson:

Observation: _____

Reflection: _____

Association: _____

Interpretation: _____

Synthesis: _____

Decision: _____

	Estimated Time	Activity	Resources Needed
Focus Activity			
Steps of the Lesson			
Concluding Activity			

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Maria Harris suggests such planning should begin, not with preparing material, but with prayer, with being still.[33] It is in prayer a teacher can consider the needs of the students, their dilemmas and their learning styles, so he or she might set aside any need to dominate or control and instead bring to the task a silence, a reverence, a respect. Parker Palmer testifies to his own understanding of prayer as

> our capacity to enter into the vast community of life in which self and other, human and non-human, visible and invisible, are intricately intertwined. While my senses discriminate and my mind dissects, my prayer acknowledges and recreates the unity of life. In prayer, I no longer set myself apart from others and the world, manipulating them to suit my needs, instead, I reach for relationship, allowing myself to feel the urgings of mutuality and accountability.[34]

It is through prayer that teachers can discern the leading of the Holy Spirit; such leading is primary to the purpose of their teaching.

The Spirit always opens us to greater compassion, greater freedom, greater life. It calls us to live, not just as individuals, but as community, speaking the truth in love so that we can

> grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every

[33] Harris, Teaching and Religious Imagination, 26.

[34] Palmer, 11.

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> ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Eph. 4:15-16)

The Spirit teaches, not only in order for an individual to discover "a truth for me," but so a community can come to know "a truth for *us*" as well, even as the meaning of "us" keeps expanding, yet to the ends of the earth.

Elders Involved in Classroom Teaching

In order to teach, the Eldership must first be willing to learn. Just as the *responsables* in *Le Chambon* found it useful to meet as a group before trying to serve as teachers in the congregation, so too it is helpful for Elders to set aside time on a regular basis to meet together for the purpose of their own study, asking questions about what the Spirit is trying to do in them and in the life of the church.

Such Eldership groups, themselves, can become places of involvement, mutuality, and accountability where Elders can begin their practice. By talking together about the congregational needs, they can gain perspective regarding their task. By taking seriously the call to live the Realm of God, practical strategies can emerge from their group to help the congregation live out its mission in its own time and place.

Attending to their own learning in the Eldership group can equip Elders to support others who teach in the broader context of congregational life. They may choose to

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volunteer periodically as an aide or a story-teller to another teacher. At times, individuals on the Eldership team may choose to teach a class or to lead a study group themselves, as did the *responsables* at *Le Chambon*. They may offer occasional presentations in Church School on topics such as stewardship, church history, or the spiritual disciplines. Some may lead the study for the women's group or the men's group; others might offer to design and lead a short course for new or perspective members; some might serve as counselors, accompanying young people to camp; others might offer an occasional meditation or lead an activity to begin a meeting.

If there is a committee or individual appointed by the congregation to oversee planning for the teaching ministry of the church, Elders can work with them in selecting curriculum, especially curriculum for children's classes. As they work together, they can include other teachers, parents, and students in looking for materials that are in keeping with the tradition of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), materials that encourage involvement, mutuality, and accountability in the classroom setting.

Whatever roles they choose to take, the Eldership can be a powerful influence in shaping a teaching ministry that will nurture people in the Christian faith. By their presence and participation in the teaching ministry they give testimony to its importance, calling adults, children

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and youth to set aside busy schedules in order to attend to their own growth in faith and discipleship.[35]

As Spiritual leaders in the congregation, the Eldership can help the community see more clearly what it is doing and is not doing to participate with the Spirit of God in the creation of the Realm of God. Elders can tell the Christian Story and help members of the congregation discuss the responses the Story invites. Then, they can help move the church to action, living more fully into the Realm of God.

It is true that this is not an easy time to be the church; but the Eldership, in its position of spiritual leadership, has a marvelous opportunity to help the community they serve to consider how it teaches through what it says and what it leaves unsaid, what it does and what it leaves undone. The Eldership, itself, can continue to recover the energy that comes from renewed self-understanding and purpose, first by attending to their own formation in the faith, and then by joining with Christ in the creation of a new people through the ministry of teaching.

[35] Christian Education coordinators rated the following as major obstacles to effective Christian Education: adults' busy schedules (72 percent) and teenagers' busy schedules (66 percent.) See Benson and Eklin, Effective Christian Education: Summary Report, 38.

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APPENDIX

A LEADERS' GUIDE FOR USE OF THIS BOOK

The following leader development design can be used with Elders who meet for four separate two-hour sessions or in a weekend retreat. In order to foster a sense of community within the group, it will be important to begin each session with a get-acquainted ice-breaker.

SESSION ONE: THE TEACHING MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH (Choose from among the following activities.)

1. As a group, make a list of your hopes for these meetings regarding the teaching ministry of the Eldership. Then list what fears you have about being called a "teacher."

2. Make a list of all the places where teaching takes place in your congregation in the course of a month. Discuss: How is the Eldership involved now? How could the Eldership be more involved?

3. Think about a Christian who has been influential to your growth in faith and discipleship, someone you have tried to emulate. Share with the group the characteristics you particularly admired in that person.

4. Do "then" and "now" skits about increasing plurality, expanding choices and boundaries that are breaking down in society.

5. Write a Prayer of Confession for the church today.

6. Make a list of the traditions you observe in your congregation. Discuss: What does each tradition say about what is important to our community?

7. Divide into an even number of teams. As a team, write a "Dear Abby" letter explaining all the reasons why it is difficult to participate in one of the spiritual disciplines (daily prayer, Bible reading, stewardship, service) and asking for advice about how to help establish that habit in your own lives. Trade letters among teams and write replies. Then share all the letters aloud in the total group.

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8. Discuss: What negative images about Christian character did you receive from the church or from the society at large when you were a child? What positive images did you receive?

SESSION TWO: TEACHING AT THE TABLE (Choose from among the following activities.)

1. Participate together in a worship service in the style of the first century church following this order:
 Servants wash feet.
 Guests are seated around a table. (If couches are available, they may recline.)
 Servants pass around bowls of water and some towels. Guests wash hands.
 The host welcomes guests as brothers and sisters in faith, and says the Words of Institution and offers this prayer from the *Didache* (pronounced did-ah-kay):
 Just as this broken bread was scattered on the mountains and gathered together became one, so let your church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. For yours is the glory and power forever.
 Servants serve a light meal (such as cheese, fruit, bread and juice). Guests talk among themselves.
 After the meal, the host offers a prayer of thanksgiving.
 Servants pass around bowls of water and some towels. Guests wash hands.
 Servants pass some flowers or some scented oil around the table for guests to smell (optional).
 Everyone sings a hymn together (such as the Doxology.)
 The host asks each of the guests to share something they remember about Jesus or his teachings.
 The host offers a benediction and guests offer each other a sign of peace by saying, "The peace of Christ go with you.")

2. Make a list of the images of the church that are present in the selections from the *Didache* that is printed in Figure 3. Form clusters. As a cluster, use water colors to paint a large poster depicting one of the images on the list. If a copy of the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry document is available, you can compare the images in the "Eucharist" section with those in the *Didache*.

3. Discuss how the meal in the award-winning video Babette's Feast is like the celebration of communion. (Babette is a superb French chef living an anonymous life among a pious congregation on the desolate coast of Denmark. One day when she wins 10,000 francs, she decides to make a feast instead of the usual meal of boiled codfish and ale-

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bread soup. The film lasts 102 minutes so you will want to view it outside the session time. It is available at many video rental outlets. It was released by Orion Pictures in 1988.)

4. Write blessings for the bread and the cup based on these images: the Lord's Supper as thanksgiving; the Lord's Supper as remembrance; the Lord's Supper as communion of the faithful; the Lord's Supper as a meal of the Realm of God. Post the prayers around the room and give people time to walk around and read them and/or make them into a booklet for everyone to keep.

5. List the images of church described in Chapter Two of this book. Discuss: Which of these images are relevant to the life of the church today? Which are not? Why?

6. Discuss: Which images of church are used most frequently by Elders at your congregation's communion table? What do those images teach about the nature of discipleship? How could the Eldership expand their use of images?

SESSION THREE: TEACHING IN LIFE'S TRANSITIONS (Choose from among the following activities.)

1. Form eight clusters. Each cluster takes a section of the diagram in Figure 7 to explain to the rest of the group. (Each cluster may want to refer to the part in the text that tells about that section before making their presentation.)

2. Read "A Parable" from Chapter Three aloud. Recall a time when you weathered one of life's storms and found yourself changed because of the experience. Share one of those incidents with a partner. Discuss: How were our own experiences similar to or different than the Transition Model shown in Figure 7.

3. Use an overhead projector to project Figure 7 on a screen or copy it onto newsprint so the whole group can see it. Brainstorm together: In your experience, what was needed at each of the eight sections of the diagram. Talk about how the Eldership can offer what people need.

4. Choose a section of the model in Figure 7 and create a clay sculpture that depicts what it feels like to be in that part of the transition cycle.

5. Browse through the Psalms. At what part of the transition cycle does the psalmist seem to be at different times in his writing?

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6. Discuss: Where do you think your congregation is on the transition cycle? Why do you think so? Where do you think the Disciples are as a denomination? Why do you think so? What might the Eldership, as spiritual leaders be able to offer the church to help further growth?

SESSION FOUR: TEACHING IN THE CLASSROOM (Choose from among the following activities.)

1. Invite participants to name the elements that went into the teaching ministry of the *responsables* at *Le Chambon*. Then discuss: How is that ministry similar or different to that of our own congregation?

2. Think about a time in your life when you were filled with wonder. Describe it to the group.

3. Divide the group into clusters. Ask each cluster to create a poster with the caption "Being an Elder is like _____."

4. Discuss: How could we create a more hospitable environment in our Elder's group? In our congregation?

5. Discuss: How are decisions made in our congregation? What do we teach, or not teach about being a Christian by that process?

6. Form six clusters. Each cluster takes one kind of enabling question listed in Figure 10 and writes an example for a lesson built around the big question "What is the meaning of the Lord's Supper?" Share the questions with the whole group.

7. In clusters, look through one lesson in a teacher's guide being used in your congregation's Christian Education program. Underline all the questions. Then go back and see what kinds of enabling questions are represented. Which kind are missing? Write them.

8. Read the story in Acts 8:26-38. How are the elements of involvement, mutuality, and accountability present between Philip and the eunuch?

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